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Folklore, Myth, and Indian Fiction in English, 1930-1961

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**Folklore, Myth, and Indian Fiction in English,
1930-1961**

Shruti Amar

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

King's College London

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village—Rama might have rested under this pipal tree, Sita might have dried her clothes ...or the Mahatma himself on many of his pilgrimage might have slept in this hut...to make the repository of your grandmother always bright—Raja Rao

I began my writing career by rendering Punjabi folktales told to me by my mother. I think the folk tales of our country are some of the most perfect literature of the unlettered life and the in-betweens of feelings of people, with a vital sense of life and death.

—Mulk Raj Anand

Genders are Genres. The world of women is not the world of men. Some of the tales are creations of women's fantasy that deny in imagination the restrictions of reality, the constraints of family and custom.

—A. K. Ramanujan

Thesis Abstract

The thesis examines the complex relationship between folklore, myth, and Indian writing in English, with reference to a number of novels and short stories written between 1930 and 1961. I look in detail at the works of five writers: Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Sudhindra Nath Ghose, R. K. Narayan, and Balachandra Rajan.

With the rise of the novel in India during the late nineteenth century, vernacular writers started to experiment with the form and style of fiction. Writing in various regional languages, they frequently drew on oral tales and devised new modes of narration. Such experimentation, however, was not confined to vernacular fiction. In this thesis, I argue that novelists writing in English such as Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and several others similarly developed a distinct style of writing, as influenced by myth, folklore and folk performances. Like the *bhasa* writers, they too began to experiment with the form of the novel and short-stories by incorporating tales, songs, and proverbs, and their performative dimensions. Folklore centred on women became crucial to this experimentation. It is this engagement with the myths, folk tales, songs and proverbs that this thesis investigates. Along with the novels of Raja Rao, Sudhindra Nath Ghose, R. K. Narayan and Balachandra Rajan, I analyse the short stories of R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand in order to understand the complex inter-textual links between written and oral traditions. There are two dimensions to my inquiry. First, through a series of close readings, I investigate how - both in terms of theme and structure - the use of myths, folk tales, songs and proverbs help to evoke, dramatise or even ironise complex situations within the text. Second, I pay special attention to the elements of performance in some of these novels. The sustained engagement of these authors with woman-centric folklore remains a strong sub-theme in the thesis; such engagement also encapsulates the various literary debates on the status of woman in South Asia and provides a glimpse into their everyday lives.

In each of my chapters, I investigate the method employed to create a new form of fiction and also how such inclusion constructs the characters as well as the relationship between them within the complex strand of caste and gender hierarchies. Though the thesis sets out to broadly discover the intricate yet inevitable relation between the folk and the written, I have kept the time period between 1930 and 1961. The period is in itself relevant in modern South Asian history as it records the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era and so my focus remains on the texts produced during this phase.

The recurrent nationalist discourse that finally culminated in the independence, as well as the partition in 1947, allowed the authors to set their fiction within the backdrop of a complex historical and political situation that offered as well as required various literary responses. The writers I argue particularly borrowed from the native mythology and folklore to respond to this change. The thesis thus intends to provide a broader perspective on the various ways in which pre-colonial and postcolonial narrative forms intermingled with each other to transform the colonial legacy.

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Introduction



Figure T.1 (A grandmother telling tales to her little grand-daughter) Courtesy of the author.

While growing up in the North Indian district of Darbhanga, I frequently came across different forms of oral traditions. My father often recounts how he grew up on tales narrated by his grandmother. Growing up in a family of fifty-two, the dark winter nights or the warm summer afternoons provided the twenty children of the large household with an age-old form of entertainment. The sister of my father has a different story. A trained folk singer, she knows at least fifty songs to be sung on various occasions. For her, these songs do not just entertain but impart rich, philosophical knowledge, practical wisdom and moral training to the listener. Many of her songs are devotional, but some of them are tearfully hilarious and display an entirely different perspective on South Asian femininity. My most direct and notable encounter with oral performance, however, happened later. A singer used to frequent my household. He was an avid performer who used to mingle prose and poetry in his narrative, and, along with his musical instrument (harmonium), enchanted his audience. He was a wanderer and had renounced the world after his son had abandoned him. His voice, therefore, held pain, and when he narrated the *viraha* episode from the *Krishna Lila*, it

resonated effectively with the audience.¹ In addition, the tales of *Hatim*, *Arabian Nights* and *Panchatantra* have shaped my childhood memories. What was interesting, though, was for me to realise how many of the South Asian novelists were similarly embedded in their native folk traditions. Even when writing in English, they fell back on their childhood memories to discover a new form of writing.

A.K. Ramanujan, in one of his essays, famously asks: ‘Who needs folklore?’ Responding to some sceptical voices that denigrated folklore as old wives’ tales and peasant superstition, Ramanujan shows the presence of ‘a large non-literate’ group of men and women who compose various oral forms in South Asia.² The present thesis is built on this argument: it examines the folkloric world as well as its influence on the writings of some of the Indian writers writing in English in the mid-twentieth century. While some critics have paid attention to the use of myth in Indian writing in English, such scholarship relies heavily on the classical tradition derived from Sanskrit and Persian literature in South Asia. My exploration, by contrast, seeks to shift the paradigm from the recovery of the classical to that of the oral vernacular tradition as well as provide a structural investigation of the various folk forms.

In recent years, the study of folkloric elements in the literature of the Indian writers writing in English, particularly within postcolonial discourse, has gained momentum. In a recent article, Vijay Mishra has drawn attention to the power of oral narratives – *testimonio* - in the formation of subaltern consciousness.³ While focusing on the indentured labourers who were carried from Kolkata to Mauritius, he describes the importance of ‘memorial

¹Viraha is a lament song. In devotional literature, it is sung to emotionally dramatise the separation of Radha and Krishna. The name of the singer is Suryanarayan Chaudhry. He lived in the Madhubani district of Bihar.

² A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Who Needs Folklore?’ in Vinay Dharwadker, ed., *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 532-52 (p. 533).

³ Vijay Mishra, ‘Plantation Diaspora *Testimonios* and the Enigma of the Black Waters’, *Interventions*, 17 (2015), 548-567 (p. 558).

reconstruction' in understanding the plight of the labourers.⁴ In the same article, he examines Amitav Ghosh's employment of Bhojpuri folk songs and how they articulate the pain of the indentured woman. Construction of modernity through folklore is another area of interrogation in contemporary postcolonial studies.⁵ Laetitia Zecchini, for example, explores the confluence of translation and creative writing, folk music and poetry, *bhakti* and Euro-American modernism in the works of modern English poets in India, and shows how such negotiations expose 'the simultaneous confluence of local and global literatures, the porosity of languages and traditions'.⁶ But the engagement of Indian novelists writing in English during the period between 1930 and 1961 with vernacular folklore remains unexplored, except for brief mention in discussions on Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. In this context, an analysis of the deep influence of and inter-textual links between the early Indian fiction in English and vernacular folklore provides fresh insights into early twentieth-century Indian fiction in English. What are the various modes of engagement and how are they employed in the novel? Why does a folk song suddenly appear within the narrative? What are the proverbs doing in a novel?

The thesis examines the relationship between folklore, myth, and Indian fiction written in English between 1930 and 1961. The works considered include *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) by Raja Rao; *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951) and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955) by Sudhin Ghose; *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961) and short-stories by R.K. Narayan; short-stories by Mulk Raj Anand; and *The Dark Dancer* (1958) by Balachandra

⁴ Vijay Mishra, 'Plantation Diaspora Testimonies and the Enigma of the Black Waters', p. 558.

⁵ In one of her essays, Rosinka Chaudhuri focuses on this co-relation, describing the formation of multiple modernities in India. While referring to the early modern Indian poet Henry Derozio, she analyses the work of the folk poet Bharatchandra Ray to show the formation of a new form of poetry in pre-colonial India. Please see Rosinka Chaudhuri, 'Reading Bharatchandra: Reading Poetry and the Figuration of Modernity in Bengal (1822-1858)' in *Interventions: Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 11 (2009), 316-33.

⁶ Laetitia Zecchini, 'Contemporary Bhakti Recastings', *Interventions*, 12 (2014), 257-76 (p. 257).

Rajan. The thesis provides a detailed analysis of the use of myth and folklore in the above fiction and investigates their significance as a tool for stylistic experimentation and innovation; paradoxically, ancient myths and folktales are recovered and deployed in these novels in order to generate new modes of writing. While focusing on this central but hitherto ignored area of folklore, the thesis thus recovers the literary as well as the oral traditions of early Indian fiction written in English. There are two dimensions to my inquiry. First, through a series of close readings, I investigate how the use of myths, folk tales, songs and proverbs helps to evoke, dramatise or even ironise - in terms of both theme and structure - complex situations within the text; second I pay special attention to the employment of an 'oral narrative style' in some of these novels.

The thesis also explores the relationship between women and folklore in order to understand the representation of women in South Asian folk tradition, and examines their participation in the various genres of folklore: songs, tales, and rituals. Building on the theoretical insights provided by critics and folklorists, such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, A. K. Ramanujan, Stuart Blackburn, and David Schulman among others, I investigate the strategies of appropriation within these novels. The detailed examination of South Indian folklore by the well-known poet, critic and folklorist A. K. Ramanujan is particularly helpful for my first, third and the fourth chapter, while the intricacies of Tamil folk myth, as analysed by David Schulman, feeds into the fifth chapter. These theoretical insights are brought into dialogue with my detailed analysis of the texts and the tracing of the inter-textual links between myth, folklore and narrative fiction within a substantial body of 20th century Indian writing in English. Methodologically, the chapter also engages with the life histories of the selected authors to understand their engagement with the native folklore, bringing some of the personal anecdotes and literary influences that shaped their literary careers and inspired them to employ various genres of folklore in their written work. Starting with the recovery of a

substantial amount of primary sources - letters and memoirs - I move to analyse the novels. The thesis, thus, widens the scope of postcolonial studies and offers a historically and textually nuanced framework to examine the relationship between postcolonial (Indian) literature and folklore studies. The research also shows how the employment of oral forms allowed the subaltern to speak, such as the singing women and peasants in *Kanthapura*, the devotional singer in *The Flame of the Forest*, or the temple dancer in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

Folklore and Myth in the Context of South Asia

The Oxford English Dictionary defines folklore as the stories of community passed down the generations through word of mouth. Some folklorists define folklore as *tradition populaires*. For them it is the poetical works of the labourers.⁷ Other folklorists have, however, challenged this definition. For Vladimir Propp, 'from a historical point of view, the entire creative output of people is folklore'.⁸ It is the output of all strata of the population except for the ruling class. In the words of Propp, folklore, therefore, 'is first and foremost, the art of oppressed classes, both peasants and workers, but also of intermediate strata that gravitates towards the lower classes'.⁹ A particular characteristic of folklore is its obscurity. The folklore usually has no creator; it is passed down from one generation to another through verbal means. Another is its use of formulas. Formulas are integral to oral transmission, and so Walter Ong argues that 'the more sophisticated orally patterned thought is, the more it is

⁷ See John Meier, *Deutsche Volkskunde* (Berlin: W.de Gruyter, 1926).

⁸ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, trans. A.Y. Martin & Richard P. Martin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 4.

⁹ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, p. 4.

likely to be marked by set expressions skilfully used'.¹⁰ Formulas help to implement 'rhythmic discourse', acting as 'a set of expressions circulating through mouths and ears'.¹¹ In addition, the circulation and variation are among the specific characteristics of folklore. Every listener, hearing the different oral stories, songs, performances or sayings, is a future carrier of the tradition. She will intentionally or unwittingly introduce change to the tale or song. At times, such changes dispose of old philosophies or tastes. A work of folklore, contends Propp, exists in a constant state of flux, and it cannot be examined fully if it is recorded just once.¹² Each recording is a variation. Folklore always shows signs of change, and once in a while a scholarly work, too, transforms into folklore. For example, A. K. Ramanujan has recorded different variations of the Shakespearean plays and the Oedipus story in South India. Similarly, the Sanskrit epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, have been turned into a noteworthy source of South Asian folklore through performance and adaptation. But there is a significant difference between the "pure" folklore and transmitted folklore. The first is an example of folklore by origin and transmission; in the second case, folklore of literary origin which means folklore by transmission but from literature by origin.¹³

It is difficult to determine the different genres within folklore. A. K. Ramanujan argues that 'in a folk system, proverb and riddle, folklore and myth, grandmother's tale and bardic narratives, ritual and theatre, nonliterate traditions and literary ones complement each other and are context-sensitive, part of one system'.¹⁴ Still, folklorists divide folklore into tales, songs, sayings, oral performance of a text, riddles, proverbs, folk art, folk myth and so on.

¹⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 35.

¹¹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, p. 35.

¹² Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, p. 8.

¹³ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, p. 9.

¹⁴ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada folklore', in A.K. Ramanujam and Stuart Blackburn ed., *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (London: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 41-75 (p. 42).

'Folktales', argues Susan Wadley, 'as a term refers to a variety of oral prose narrative traditions in South Asia, told in prose, not sung, although some folktales may include sung rhymes or verses, usually for special effect'.¹⁵ Hence, the speech style of the teller of a folktale is conversational and relatively unmarked. This distinguishes the folk tale from the folk epic, which is sung and usually has major portions in verse. Stories, or folktales, as a scholar from the Kangra valley in North India recently stated, 'are about love (though not always)...They are about deluded infatuation, possessive attachment, and nurturing affection'.¹⁶ The stories have a particular opening and closing style. Folk songs are often sung in praise of a god or a saint; they are also an important part of festivals, particularly marriage. They utilize particular devices, for example refrain and alliteration, to attract the audience. Ramanujan defines proverbs as the "portable paradigms" of a society.¹⁷ He further adds that, according to the famous folklorists, 'they mention objects of nature or culture not for their poetic or logical value but to make a didactic point or to illustrate a belief'.¹⁸ Folk myths originate from the folk Puranas and are related to a local cult, caste, with its own origin myths, sacred calendar and sacred geography.¹⁹ They often form the inter-textual structures, with many of them relying on the Sanskrit texts for the basic characters; but they also provide a "counter-text" to the fixed Puranic mythological conceptions.²⁰

The oral tradition that forms the basis of folklore is ubiquitous in many parts of South Asia. The multiplicity of language, religion and culture allows the construction of multiple

¹⁵ Susan Wadley, 'Folktale', in Margaret A. Mills, Peter J. Claus and Sarah Diamond ed., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopaedia* (Routledge: London, 2003), p. 218-220 (p. 218).

¹⁶ Kirin Narayan, *Mondays on the dark night of the moon: Himalayan foothill folktales* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.

¹⁷ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada folklore', p. 42.

¹⁸ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada folklore', p. 42.

¹⁹ Folk Puranas are different from classical. They do rely on traditional episodes but include their own interpretation, locality or even characters.

²⁰ See A.K. Ramanujan, 'On Folk Mythologies and Folk Purāṇas' in Wendy Doniger ed., *Puran Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jain Text* (New York: State University Press, 1993), pp. 101-120.

variants of folk genres—tales, songs, proverbs, riddles, sayings and so on. The oral forms or their variants are found at every street corner, family household or mass gathering. Whether it is the harvest song sung in the fields or the *kajli* songs to welcome the rain, the presence of folkloric genres is wide and pervasive. The transfer of oral tales through an elderly member of the household, most preferably a grandmother, is the most notable way of continuing the tradition. In addition, there are several folk theatres, such as *Jatra* in Bengal, *Ramlila* in Orissa and *Yakshgana* in Karnataka, that perform both mythic and secular episodes in different ways.²¹ Folklore, thus, is an integral part of the South Asian cultural tradition. Every region in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan or Nepal has its own typical oral culture.



Figure T.2 *Ramalila*, New Delhi. Courtesy Richard Williams

Still, the study of folklore as a subject began only in the early nineteenth century. Often considered as a ‘mixed blessing of British colonialism’, the extensive study of folklore began

²¹ *Ramlila* is the oral performance, popular in Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It is based on the episodes of *Ramayana*. *Yakshgana* is once again a folk theatrical form popular in Karnataka state of India. It is also based on various mythological episodes.

during the 1850s.²² Many missionaries and colonial administrators began excavating the oral sources. The establishment of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal and Indian Antiquary in 1874 and the publication of the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* in 1886 further enhanced the collection of the oral tales, songs and proverbs.²³ Most of the articles published in these journals relied on Sanskrit texts, but at times a brief article on oral narrative and on other genres of folklore would appear. However, the bulk of the collections in this period were carried on by missionaries and independent British civil servants. While the missionaries had their own agenda in the publication of these oral materials, British civil servants mostly worked tirelessly to unearth the various forms of folk traditions through their works. A huge amount of folkloric data was prepared during this period which guides the researcher even today. For instance, Verrier Elwin and George Grierson recorded, collected and translated many Santhali and Bhojpuri folk songs during the nineteenth century.²⁴ There were also native collectors, such as L.B. Day in the North and Natesa Sastri in the South, who contributed extensively to the study of folklore.

²² Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes ed., *A Flowering Tree* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1997), p. xi.

²³ Amresh Dutta, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, vol.2 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1987), p. 1273.

²⁴ The work of Erwin on tribal folklore is well-known. Also, his involvement with the tribal culture is still remembered. Similarly, George Grierson's voluminous *The Linguistic Survey of India* (1903-1907) contributed enormously to the study of folklore in the early twentieth century. He also contributed many articles to the Folklore Society Journal, published in London. Richard Temple's *Legends of Punjab* (1889) was another landmark in the history of folklore studies in India. It not only collected the oral tales but also surveyed and classified the actions found in many of these tales. Amitav Ghosh, in *Sea of Poppies* (2008), shows his debts to Grierson for his contribution to the study of folklore. Another remarkable early European folklorist working in India was Mary Frere. Mary Eliza Isabella Frere (1845-1911), the eldest daughter of Bartle Edward Frere, is the author of an extraordinary collection of folktales called *Old Deccan Days or Hindu Fairy Legends, Current in Southern India*, first published in 1868. Please see Mary Frere, *Old Deccan days, or Hindoo fairy legends, current in Southern India* (London: John Murray, 1868).

In the 1880s and 1890s, growing nationalism in India made folklore part of anti-colonial self-articulation. The nationalist leaders mostly belonged to the middle-class and used various written forms - newspapers, pamphlets, journals - for spreading their ideologies, but soon they recognized the essential vitality of folklore in dispersing ideas of nationalism to the wider public, particularly the rural masses. In Calcutta, as Stuart Blackburn claims, folklore became 'an act of restoration', a tool to preserve cultural identity.²⁵ For instance, the *jatra* was extensively drawn upon during the *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal in 1905 to spread the new political ideology among the rural peasants and labourers. The rise of print in the later nineteenth century gave new impetus to popular folk traditions. A number of printing presses began to cluster around the by-lanes of Battala. Most of the works produced ranged from mythological literature, legends and romances to popular dramas.²⁶ Commenting on this phenomenon, Anindita Ghosh in her influential work *Power in Print* (2006) remarks 'Print in nineteenth-century Bengal not only generated high literature of vernacular reformists and purists, but also large corpus of popular books'.²⁷

Many folklorists in Bengal published folk tales to reclaim their lost heritage. Dakshinranjan Mitra Majumdar published *Thakumar Jhuli* in 1907, whereas Dinesh Chandra Sen's *The Folk literature of Bengal* came out in 1920. In many of these collections, folklore was stated as an integral part of Bengal's glorious heritage. In 1894, Rabindranath Tagore gave a famous lecture entitled 'Bengali National Literature' and formed a literary society famously called *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad*, which was formed for the preservation of the Bengali literature, including folklore.²⁸ In 1897 and 1898, he published two volumes of stories, mostly derived from oral sources. Also, while writing the preface to a collection of

²⁵ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism* (London: Permanent Black, 2010), p. 158.

²⁶ Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 16.

²⁷ Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print*, p. 107.

²⁸ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism*, p. 158.

folk tales published in 1907, Tagore expressed his discontent with the waning popularity of the folklore. He claimed that ‘the elements of the ancient culture of Bengal were languishing like a dying river’, adding, ‘its villages that were once rich repertoire of folk tales and songs were turning into arid land tracts’.²⁹

Madras province was another important centre for folklore studies during the early twentieth century. In Madras, though, the idea of folklore and nation was conceived within the context of the Dravidian uprising. The collection, translation, and printing of folklore in South India began in the eighteenth century, and later, in the early nineteenth century, British civil servants translated and printed various folk tales, legends and songs. During the 1870s and 1880s, however, folklore became a tool for constructing the idea of the nation.³⁰ The folklorists, such as Subramaniam Bharti and Natesha Sastri, claimed folklore as a legitimate expression of national culture and during the Non-cooperation movement (1920-21) of M. K. Gandhi it was used to spread the nationalist message. The folklore, however, celebrated opposition not only to British colonialism but also to Brahminical-Sanskrit domination, establishing itself as a dominant counter-text to the orthodox system. Hence, in contrast to Bengal, this construct drew upon the feeling of cultural subjugation and established folklore as the voice of the depressed classes. Stuart Blackburn therefore argues that ‘Tamil constructions of folklore and the nation arose from a less ideological and more personal sense of loss’.³¹

Many nationalist leaders, both in colonial South and North India, were exposed to various genres of folklore and in several cases it even shaped their political views. For instance,

²⁹ Dakshinranjan Mitra Majumdar, *ThakumarJhuli: twelve stories from Bengal*, trans. Sukhendu Ray (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), p. 1.

³⁰ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism*, p. 158.

³¹ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism*, p. 158.

Mahatma Gandhi's deep love of *Ramayana*, which shaped much of his political activism, was formed during his early years through listening to oral narratives. He recounts:

What, however, left a deep impression on me was the reading of the *Ramayana* before my father. During part of his illness my father was in Porbandar. There every evening he used to listen to the *Ramayana*. The reader was a great devotee of Ram-Ladha Maharaj of Bileshvar...He had a melodious voice. He would sing the *dohās* (couplets) and *caupāīs* (quatrains) and explain them, losing himself in the discourse and carrying his listeners along with him. I must have been thirteen at that time, but I quite remember being enraptured by his reading. That laid the foundation of my deep devotion to the *Ramayana*.³²

The recollection shows Gandhi's deep association of the epic with the oral narrative tradition. Here, he refers to the act of listening to the tales and how it 'left a deep impression' on him and that he was 'enraptured by the reading'. Hence, as Philip Lutengendorf claims, it was Gandhi's connection with the *Katha* that partly shaped his political ideology.³³ Such veneration of oral tradition echoes Frantz Fanon's example, where he refers to the role of oral tradition in forming national culture.³⁴ While discussing the impact of oral performance on the construction of nationalism, Fanon quotes the example of Algerian story-tellers who modified their narrative according to popular mood.³⁵ In South Asia, too, as I will analyse in the first chapter, oral performers adapted their tales to disperse political ideas during Gandhi's non-co-operation movement in 1921-22. Thus, the historical links between folklore and South Asian nationalism are profound. Blackburn has successfully shown this inter-

³² Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, trans. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1927), p. 23-4.

³³ Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text* (Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 379.

³⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1961), p. 240.

³⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 240.

relation with reference to the Madras region.³⁶ Still, there were various ambivalences in the appropriation of folklore during this phase and, as Tapti Roy claims, nationalists condemned popular tradition as vulgar and backward, but projected them as authentic, uncontaminated—something that required recovery and preservation.³⁷ They disciplined its content from within.

In the years after the decolonization of South Asia, folklore gained considerable attention and various folklorists from India and abroad began a systematic study of folklore. In the late 1950s, three important indexes were made for India modelled on and feeding into the international motif-and-type indexes of Aarne and Thompson: C. Bodker's *Indian Animal Tales: A Preliminary Survey* (1957); S. Thompson and J. Bayly's Motif-Index *The Oral Tales of India* (1958); and S. Thompson and W. E. Roderts's *Types of Indic Oral Tales* (1960).³⁸ Even when these motif indexes do not adhere to the new scientific analysis, they are significant in providing useful bibliographical tools to the contemporary folklorist. But they are based on old data and use the English translation of the tales. It is only during the 1960s that we see a new regionalist interest in folklore. Many good collections have been made in regional languages and many South Asian Universities are allotting funds for the study of folklore. Speaking only of folktales, Ramanujan, way back in the 1990s, claimed that over 3,000 tales have been collected from towns and villages, and two reliable type-indexes were compiled in Kannada during the 1980s.³⁹ Many scholars, both in India and abroad, have contributed enormously to the field, providing significant scientific and literary tools for

³⁶ Please see Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism* (London: Permanent Black, 2010).

³⁷ Tapti Roy, 'Disciplining the Printed text', in Partha Chatterjee ed., *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 30-63 (p. 57-9).

³⁸ A. K. Ramanujan, 'Foreword', in Brenda Breck et al, ed., *Folktales of India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. xv.

³⁹ A. K. Ramanujan, 'Foreword', in Brenda Breck et al, ed., *Folktales of India*, p. xv.

further enquiry.⁴⁰ In spite of this impressive history of scholarship on folklore - including the early theories, later collections, analyses, and indices - several shortcomings are evident. Alan Dundes refers to several anomalies in the study of folklore in the recent period. First, the oral performance and social context of Indian folktales are not well researched; second, very few studies analyse multiple versions of a single tale; third, careful comparison with international parallels is often neglected; fourth, the emphasis is typically on collection at the expense of the meaning; and fifth, the current tale type and motif indexes are inadequate.⁴¹

Recent and continuing work in Indian languages and European languages has begun to redress these problems, and Ramanujan's scholarship has substantially shaped these efforts.

Just like folklore, the study of South Asian myth has received widespread attention during the twentieth century. Many mythologists have studied the popular mythological concepts to understand the impact of these stories on the culture of this region.⁴² Myth, as a rule, is a traditional story held sacred by a particular community. According to Diane Mines, 'myths are cosmogonic narratives'.⁴³ Their characters are chiefly superhuman: gods, demons, powerful animals, divinities of all kinds. Northrop Frye has observed, 'In terms of narrative, myth is the imitation of action here or at the conceivable limits of desire which means that

⁴⁰ A.K. Ramanujan, Girish Karnad, David Schulman, Peter.J.Claus, Brenda Beck (to name a few in the South) and Philip Lutengendorf, Susan Wadley, Francesca Orsini, Ashutosh Bhattacharya, Sumanta Banerjee (again to name a few in the North) have made relevant contributions to the field. For instance, see Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan ed. *Another Harmony*; Arjun Appadurai et al ed., *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); Susan Wadley, *Essays On North Indian Folk Tradition* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2005).

⁴¹ Alan Dundes, 'Introduction', in Stuart Blackburn and Alan Dundes, ed., *A Flowering Tree* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1997), p. xi.

⁴² See for examples the works of Wendy Doniger. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgyny and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁴³ Diane Mines, 'Myth', in Margaret A.Mills, Peter J.Claus and Sarah Diamond ed., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopaedia* (Routledge: London, 2003), pp. 424-425 (p. 424).

myth is a structural literary pattern recurrent in literature'.⁴⁴ In ancient Europe, the myths were held sacred, but during the Enlightenment, numerous researchers recognised myths as the survivors of the primitive ages which prompted the advancement of a branch of study called comparative mythology. The German Romantics were enthusiastic about the close investigation of myth. Researchers such as Frederic Creuzer, G. Kanne, J. Gorres, and Friedrich Schlegel, began looking at Greek and Oriental mythology. Over the span of time, these researchers built up another philology that entwined Greek myth with Sanskrit, the Vedas and the "Aryans". Later on, the famous mythologists such as Albert Kuhn in Germany, Michel Bréal in France, and England's Max Müller committed themselves to the new Oriental discoveries. Max Müller was the most influential among them and from 1860 to 1880 his theories were revered both in England and on the continent. His theory and definition of myth is based on the popular "Aryan" linguistic hypothesis, which contends that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Gothic Slavonic, Celtic and other languages descended from a common origin. In practice, Müller considers Sanskrit, though, to be the original source of the languages and Vedas as the authentic scripture of the original Aryan people.⁴⁵ With the rise of psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century, the ancient definition of myth began to be questioned. For psychoanalysts, myth is not primarily concerned with natural phenomenon but with human nature, particularly sexuality.⁴⁶ Myth, however, in real terms is what Richard Chase defines as, 'a matter of aesthetic experience and the imagination'.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, Pvt. 1973), p. 136. Please also see Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 28.

⁴⁵ See William Dwight Whitney, *Max Müller and the Science of Language: A Criticism* (New York: D. Appleton, 1892).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). First edition was originally published in 1899.

⁴⁷ Richard Chase, *Quest For Myth* (New York: Greenwood house, 1969), p. vi.

Historically, in South Asia, myths are the sacred legends passed on through written Sanskrit and Persian texts. The composite culture of the sub-continent and the presence of a wide range of religions results in the composition and transmission of various mythological stories. Hindu myths describe gods and demons and the battles between them. Some Muslim myths depict fantastic versions of the lives of Mohammed and his family, while others deify local saints.⁴⁸ In addition, Christian, Jewish, Jain, Buddhist, Sikh, Parsi, and tribal myths, all find expression in the oral, performative, and literary tradition of the subcontinent. However, Hindu Myths in the South Asian context have long been associated to the dominant brahminical traditions. Since the *Puranas* (which are the incessant source of Hindu mythology) are written in Sanskrit, they are often associated with the dominant, literate castes in South Asia.⁴⁹ Similarly, Persian was the court language during the Mughal period and so its dominant use is prevalent among the elite class.

In contrast, folklore is composed and transmitted in a regional language and represents popular culture. It is the main cultural mode of the non-literate masses - from peasants and artisans to village women - who transmit the tales and songs through word of mouth. Gradually these oral forms have become a large repertoire of the ordinary voice. At the same time, myth and folklore are not watertight compartments: they frequently intersect. The elements of myth metamorphose into folklore. Both traditions overlap and contradict in many ways. A. K. Ramanujan argues that they form a close cycle.⁵⁰ A story, for instance, can be a part of the Sanskrit text but is also narrated to children during the night. The traditional myth

⁴⁸ See Diane Mines, 'Myth', in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopaedia*, p. 425.

⁴⁹ While commenting on the dichotomy between high and low caste in India, Velcheru Narayan Rao argues that India has different ways of conceptualizing time. While the low-caste non-literate people have a folk concept of time/space, upper-caste Sanskrit-educated Brahmins have a puranic concept of time and space. See Velcheru Narayan Rao, 'Purāṇa as Brahminic Ideology', in Wendy Doniger ed. *Purāṇa Perennis: Reciprocity and Transformation in Hindu and Jain Text* (New York: State University Press, 1993), pp. 85-100 (p. 88).

⁵⁰ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore', p. 51.

and folklore are distinctive in language, subject or even audience, however in South Asia their 'method of production, distribution and consumption are similar'.⁵¹ Hence, myth and folklore are disparate twins—similar yet different. I will quote some examples to discuss this interesting paradoxical relation.

In *Life of a Text*, Philip Lutengendorf narrates the juxtaposition of *Ramacaritmanas* verses with the folk song:

The other companion saw her condition,
Her limbs flushed with delight, tears in her eyes.
They all softly asked, “Tell us the cause of your joy.”

*The arrow of your eyes has struck,
Dark youth,
Your smile has pierced my heart,
Dark Youth. (refrain)*

“Two princes have come to see the robust youths,
Handsome in every way,
One dark, one fair; how can I describe them?
Speech lacks eyes, and eyes lack voice to speak!”

*The arrow of your eyes has struck,
Dark youth,
Your smile has pierced my heart,
Dark Youth.⁵²(refrain)*

The intermingling of the classical text with the folk song- *kajli* - constructs a new meaning, imparting *sringar* (erotic) *rasa* into the episode. The performers are singing the *phulwari* scene from the epic where Sita is to meet with Rama for the first time. Her companions are overjoyed to see the two beautiful princes and they sing the song to add

⁵¹ Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Introduction’, in Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan ed., *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, p. 26.

⁵² Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text* (Berkeley; Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 109. The folk songs sung by women during the marriage or the ceremonial departure of the bride are also influenced by the episodes of the epic. In these songs, the lament of the mother and other women family members are apparent and this shows women’s creativity at its best. Many of these songs are transmitted orally down the generations. The epic characters in these songs are domesticated and brought down to the level of an ordinary human being.

romantic overtones to the meeting of the two lovers. The lyrics are well-suited to the mood. What is interesting, however, is the confluence of the oral and written tradition in the performance. A mythical episode is elevated through the addition of refrain, creating new strands of meaning. Such overlap between myth and folklore is not new in South Asia. There are several performative traditions that rely on mythical episodes. The epic *Ramayana* alone forms the basis of a huge regional folk tradition.⁵³



Figure T.3 *Kirtan* at Allahabad. Courtesy Dipesh Chandra.

At the same time, there are several differences between myth and folklore. The Sanskrit epics are intertwined with narratives about power, authority, rights, duties and obligations. Folklore, in contrast, challenges the notions of *dharma* (duty), power and obligation.⁵⁴ For instance, in one such tale, told in Kannada and Telugu, Tenali Ram rebukes Brahmins for

⁵³ In Kerala, for instance, Sanskrit texts are performed in *Kuttupulam* (temple of acting), but the teller narrates episodes in Malayalam, a local language, throwing hilarious jokes as well as anecdotes during the telling to entertain the audience. The well-known *Kathakali* dance-drama is a modern version of *Kutiyattam*, and began its career as *Ramanttam* (Rama Ballet), popularly known as *Kathakali* in the second half of the seventeenth century. Please see N.V. Krishna Warrior, 'The *Ramayana* in Malayalam Literature and Folklore', in V.Raghvan, ed., *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), pp. 204-214 (p. 205).

⁵⁴ Please see, Paula Richman, ed., *Many Rāmāyaṇas: the diversity of a narrative tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

their greed.⁵⁵ Many folk-songs, too, describe the apathies of the labourers, peasants and farmers. In Tamil, for example, the folk songs consist of love-songs and the songs of labourers. The former depicts the various moods pertaining to pre-marital and post-marital love, while the latter narrates the sorrow and delight of the subaltern. In ballads, which are the most powerful literary creations among the different genres of folklore we see the construction of an alternative version of the mythical episodes. In contrast to mythic heroes, who are kings or princes, the protagonists of the ballads are low-caste members of society. For instance, in Tamil, we hear a popular prose narrative of a strong man called Madurai Viram.⁵⁶ He is also worshipped by the 'Chammar' and other so-called 'low-caste' communities in the Madurai region.⁵⁷ In the same way, we have ballads on the life and achievement of Innamuttu Pandiyam, Salaiyan and so on. They represent a protest against the atrocities perpetrated on them. The representations of the female characters (this will remain an area of discussion throughout the thesis), however, illustrate the most significant contradiction between myth and folklore. I will now discuss the remarkable representations of women in the South Asian folklore and will go on to suggest the wide contrast between the representation of female voices in the myth and folklore.

⁵⁵ A.K. Ramanujan, *Folktales from India* (New York: Pantheon books, 1991), p. 203. In the tale, a queen mother dies with a wish to eat a mango. The King, her son, could not fulfil her last wish, so he decides to distribute mangoes of gold to one hundred Brahmins. When Brahmins were moving towards the palace, Tenali Ram catches them in the middle and says that 'anyone who will get branded with an Iron rod will get two golden mangoes'. So Tenali Ram brands greedy Brahmins with the iron rod. When the King hears about it, he becomes angry and asks Rama to explain. Rama clarifies that his mother died without being branded by iron rods. She had arthritis and doctors had advised her to be branded with a red-hot iron. It was only to fulfil her wish that he branded these Brahmins with a red-hot iron.

⁵⁶ Amresh Dutta, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, vol. 2 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1987), p. 1313.

⁵⁷ Chammar is a low-caste community in India that is known for its leather work.

Beyond the Curtain: Women and Folklore



Figure T.4 (Women singing songs at Vridheswarnath Temple, Bhagalpur, India)

Courtesy of the author

Finding a personal voice in male-dominated spaces is at the centre of the South Asian folkloric discourse, and in many ways questions deep patriarchal traditions that subjugate women in multiple ways.⁵⁸ In South Asia, the physical segregation between men and women is still quite prevalent. In northern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, these rules of gender segregation are referred to as *purdah* (female seclusion), a term derived from the Persian for curtain. The *purdah* system (not all South Asian woman leave behind veils) restricts the free speech and movement of women, and segregates males and females during work, leisure and ritual activities.⁵⁹ Depending on their religion, caste, and class, after attaining puberty girls have only restricted access to particular areas. Particularly in villages, they are confined within an inner household or a typical locality. Such confinement results in a separate oral culture that illustrates the women's world. An alternative women-centric tradition is formed beyond the curtain. In many of these women-centric tales, songs or proverbs, we see a protest

⁵⁸Arjun Appadurai, et al ed., *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), p. 9.

⁵⁹ Susan Wadley, 'Gender and Folklore', in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Margaret A.Mills, Peter J.Claus and Sarah Diamond ed., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge: London, 2003), pp. 241-46, (p. 241).

against the patriarchal subjugation. For instance, in a folk song genre called *giddha*, performed particularly during weddings or festivals, women rebuke their in-laws and protest against the traditional system: ‘I will grind red chilis fine with my new pestle/And throw them in my father-in-law’s eyes to blind him/Then I won’t have to cover my face in his presence’.⁶⁰

In the Sanskrit classics, women are often shown as chaste and monogamous in their relationship with men and any transgression of the moral order is adequately punished. For instance, Ahalya, in *Ramayana*, is seduced by Indra in the form of her husband Gautam. But when her husband returns home and discovers the couple, he punishes his wife and turns her to stone. In folktales, songs or proverbs, though, as A. K. Ramanujan has shown, women are neither reprimanded nor questioned for their polygamous relations. Such transgression is commonplace allowing women to voice their fantasies, sexual desires and longings with ease. Consider the following tale, a variant of the classic European tale of Oedipus:

A girl is born with a curse on her head that she would marry her own son and beget a son by him. She hides herself in a dense forest, but gets impregnated by eating a mango. She gives birth to a male child, but throws him in a nearby stream. The child is eventually picked up by the king of a nearby kingdom. The boy grows into a young prince and visits the forest. The girl falls in love and gets married. She bears him a child, but according to the custom, the father’s swaddling clothes were preserved and brought out for the newborn son. The woman recognises the clothes, and realizes that her fate has really caught up with her. She sings a lullaby to her newborn baby.

Sleep
O son

⁶⁰ Amy Catlin, ‘Folk Music’, in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, in Margaret A. Mills, Peter J. Claus and Sarah Diamond ed., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge: London, 2003), pp. 208-13 (p. 210).

O grandson
O brother to my husband
Sleep O sleep
Sleep well⁶¹

In some variants of the tale, the mother hangs herself, but in others, she prays to the goddess and accepts her fate. She confides the truth to the goddess and lives happily with her husband. What is interesting in this is the reversal of the narrative point of view. Ramanujan argues that ‘unlike the Greek Oedipus the son is merely a passive actor’.⁶² The whole narrative is told from a mother’s point of view and it is she who suffers the tragic destiny. Also, the story is invariably told by women and to girls. The anthropologist Irawati Karve, who collected one of the variants of the story, remembers how, when she questioned an old woman teller about what she thought of the story, the teller replied, ‘But what else could she do? You know, madam, it was written so’.⁶³ Surprised by the candour of the teller, Karve notes, ‘At the end of the tale my little daughter and the narrator were both laughing at the queerness of the happening’.⁶⁴ In numerous stories, as Brenda Beck claims, women show up in semi-supernatural parts, overruling or supplanting their male partners.⁶⁵ In such stories, a young girl accepts the focal position and faces a dangerous situation with courage. In a number of the stories, she even protects her husband, sibling or father. The demonstration of bravery of the female characters in large parts of these stories appears very different in relation to the typically modest women of the traditional sagas.

⁶¹ Please see Irawati Karve, ‘A Marathi Version of the Oedipus Story’, *Man* (1950), 71-72. Also see A.K. Ramanujan, ‘The Indian Oedipus’, in Lowell Edmunds and Alan Dundes, ed., *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook* (New York: Garland Press, 1983), pp. 234-66.

⁶² A.K. Ramanujan, ‘The Indian Oedipus’, in Vinay Dharwadker ed., *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 377-97 (p. 380).

⁶³ Please see Irawati Karve, ‘A Marathi Version of the Oedipus Story’, p. 71-72.

⁶⁴ Please see Irawati Karve, ‘A Marathi Version of the Oedipus Story’, p. 71-72.

⁶⁵ Brenda Beck, ‘Introduction’, in Brenda Beck et al, ed., *Folktales of India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. xxx-xxxi. For example, please see Punjabi folk tale called ‘Bopoluchi’, where an orphan girl of a similar name outmaneuvers her male enemy through her power.

In South Asia, folk song is all-pervasive. Amy Catlin argues that ‘this reflects a widely held belief in music’s auspicious properties’.⁶⁶ Women are especially known for their repertoire of songs, often sung in groups during life-cycle celebrations such as the many stages of weddings: during the application of henna to the hands of the bride, the arrival of the bridegroom at the bride’s house, and the departure of the bride for the groom’s house, for example.⁶⁷ Women’s songs often reflect the world around them. The folk songs in particular interject the caste and gender hierarchies. The life events of *Sita* (I will discuss this in detail in the fifth chapter), the legendary queen of the epic *Ramayana*, particularly inspire the composers of the folk songs.⁶⁸ A. K. Ramanujan records the most interesting folk song:

O what shame, Ravulu in his seventh month,
And soon came the eight, O Shiva
Ravula was in his ninth full month.
When he was round and ready, she’s born, the dear,
Sita is born through his nose.
When he sneezes, Sitamma is born,
And Ravula names her Sitamma.⁶⁹

In the above story, the traditional bards (*tamburidasayyas*) represent Sita as the daughter of Ravana. The word *Ravulu* means Ravana and he becomes pregnant after eating a mango. When he becomes round and ready, he sneezes and ‘Sitamma’ comes out of his nose. Sita in Kannada means sneeze, and so Ravana calls her by this particular name, but when he hears a prophecy that she will be the reason for his death he abandons her. The story from now on is similar to the popular version, but what makes it intriguing is the reversal of point of view.

⁶⁶ Amy Catlin, ‘Folk Music’, in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopaedia*, in Margaret A. Mills, Peter J. Claus and Sarah Diamond ed., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopaedia* (Routledge: London, 2003) pp. 208-213 (p. 208).

⁶⁷ Amy Catlin, ‘Folk Music’, p. 210.

⁶⁸ C.R. Sharma, ‘The Rāmāyaṇa in Telugu Literature and Folklore’ in V. Raghavan, ed., *The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition in Asia* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), pp. 215-25 (p. 222). They compose songs extolling her divinity, but at times create or invert the popular episode. For instance, in a Telugu folk song called *Santa Govind Namamulu*, Sita is described as the goddess Lakshmi who is born in a Lotus pond in Lanka, the capital city of Ravana.

⁶⁹ A. K. Ramanujan, ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’, in Vinay Dharwadker ed., *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 131-60 (p. 146).

Commenting on this role-reversal, Ramanujan says that ‘one here sees not only a different texture and emphasis: the teller everywhere is eager to return to Sita—her life, her birth, her adoption, her wedding, her abduction and her recovery’.⁷⁰



Figure T.5 London *Diwali* Festival, 2016

(Rama and Sita along with Laxman and Urmilla).

While examining Rajasthani folk songs, Ann Grodzins Gold claims that these traditions counter some prevailing gender stereotypes and in them we find neither the modesty and embarrassment prescribed as appropriate ornamental female behavior within the culture, nor the voicelessness and submissiveness attached to South Asian women.⁷¹ In many folk songs, for instance, we hear their repressed voices, articulating the loss of their mate or spouse. At times, the female singers represent the woman’s distress after she is isolated from her beloved. In a few tunes, women change into an enticing beloved, in others they demonstrate their feelings of despondency. Ann Grodzins Gold argues that ‘many women’s songs deliberately juxtapose the total intimacy (having much to do with sexual intercourse) that

⁷⁰ A. K. Ramanujan, ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’, p. 147.

⁷¹ Ann Grodzins Gold, ‘Outspoken women: Representations of Female voices in a Rajasthani Folklore Community’, *Oral Tradition*, 12/1(1997), 103-33 (p. 103). Also see Ann Grodzins Gold, ‘Sexuality, Fertility, and Erotic Imagination in Rajasthani Women’s Songs’ in Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold ed., *Listen to the Heron’s Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 30-72.

constitutes the relationships between spouses'.⁷² The point of view is always of the female partner. Consider the following:

Karthik, O companions,
Heartless beloved
Never feels my pain!

Jeth month, whitened the colourful
Surely he has gone to see another beautiful woman!⁷³ (my translation)

Similarly, Helen Meyers records the songs of the indentured women:

Blow eastern breeze, pain come up:
Oh! Pain comes up, Oh! Pain comes up!
Blow eastern breeze, pain comes up oh!
In what city to search for my husband.⁷⁴

Such subtle emotions are invoked in the folk songs to display a woman's suffering. Such tales, songs and even proverbs, through comic relief, not only entertain the listener but also comment on social behaviour. The various genres of the folklore allow women a voice of their own. They represent dilemmas and conflict, emotions and relations, mating and separation. It is this fascinating aspect of the South Asian folklore that drives writers to employ folkloric forms into their writing.

Folklore, Myth and early Indian Fiction in English

In Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2009), the female labourer sings a song of lament:

⁷² Ann Grodzins Gold, 'Outspoken women: Representations of Female voices in a Rajasthani Folklore Community', p. 107.

⁷³ I have translated the song from the Maithili language. Tarakant Mishra, *Maithili Lok-Sahitya Ka Adhyan* (Maithili) (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1985), p. 225.

⁷⁴ Helen Myers, *Music of Hindu Trinidad: Songs from the Indian Diaspora* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 86.

Talwajharálé
Kāwalkumhláile
Hanse royé
Birahábiyog

The Pond is dry
The Lotus withered
The swan weeps
For its absent love⁷⁵

While waiting on the *Ibis*, which is soon to take its traveler into some distant world, Deeti sings this song of lament. The song at once becomes a metaphor for loss and reminds her of the songs sung when a daughter departs from her ancestral home to some other world. Such folk songs, as Vijay Mishra argues, reconstruct memory, ‘providing another way of looking at the subaltern’.⁷⁶ What is interesting, though, is the brilliant employment of folklore to capture subdued emotions. At times, words become incapable of expressing a deep sense of loss, pain and longing. In such moments, folk song allows writers to bring out the deeply submerged emotional layers to the forefront of the narrative, offering textual density to the plot. In some cases, the engagement of the writers with folklore does not end with such employment; some of them go beyond and modify the form of the novel through experimentation. Meenakshi Mukherjee has drawn attention to the manner in which pre-novel narrative traditions have complicated modern South Asian novels. She points to the process of mixing of pre-colonial narratives forms with the modern fiction through which these novels and short stories form a distinct category of what Javed Majeed calls ‘narrative amalgams’.⁷⁷ Citing an example from Chandu Menon’s *Indulekha*, where the author struggles to break away from the past tradition ends the novel declaring: ‘All characters

⁷⁵Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (London: John Murray, 2009), p. 415.

⁷⁶Vijay Mishra, ‘Plantation Diaspora Testimonies and the Enigma of the Black Waters’, p. 558.

⁷⁷Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 9-10; Javed Majeed, ‘Literary Modernity in South Asia’, in Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu ed., *India and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 262-283 (p. 268.).

mentioned...have reached the summit of human happiness, and now may God bless us and all who read this tale', Mukherjee successfully draws attention to the continuing influence of the Puranic tradition, oral narratives, and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* on the modern novels.⁷⁸ 'Such writing was complicated', argues Mukherjee, 'by the existence of a pre-novel narrative tradition which also depended, as did historical fiction, on a setting remote in time, necessary- and quite opposite in need to that of historical fiction – for a suspension of disbelief'.⁷⁹ Francesca Orsini has similarly studied historical novels in Hindi within the context of the *dastan* tradition of the early Urdu literature.⁸⁰ An interesting case in point is Rusva's *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899) for the translation of oral tradition into the written form is at the core of this novel.⁸¹ The early short-stories of Rabindranath Tagore and modern Tamil poetry, similarly, show an engagement with the tradition of oral story-telling.

In India, poetry in English developed in the mid-nineteenth century. However, fiction in English grew much later. One reason for this late arrival was the prominence of poetry in Sanskrit and Persian which conferred high artistic worth to the class of verse—epic, *ghazals* or *thumris*. Another issue was the language. The seeds of linguistic nationalism in India were sown in the nineteenth century. Benedict Anderson claims that 'from the start nation was conceived in language' and, therefore, since the beginning of the nationalism in the nineteenth century, the debate around the language became prominent and the power of English as the language was questioned.⁸² The language of the colonizers between 1880 and

⁷⁸ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, p. 9-10.

⁷⁹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, p. 40.

⁸⁰ Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 92-115. The popular reading in Hindi in the nineteenth century, before the novel came into existence, included stories from *Betal-pachisi*, *Simbasan-battisi*, *Tilism-i-Hoshruha* *Daastan-e-Ameer Hamza*, *Kissa Tota-Maina* and other tales featuring miraculous happenings and magical deeds. Amrit Rai, *Premchand Rai: A Life* (New Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1982), pp. 18-19.

⁸¹ Javed Majeed, 'Literary Modernity in South Asia', p. 281.

⁸² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 149.

1947 was especially viewed as an image of elitism and foreignness. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who published his first novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) in English, soon relinquished the language for his local Bengali. Commenting on this phenomenon Rosinka Chaudhuri argues that 'an emergent nationalism at the end of the century made the mother tongue (Bengali) more important in the consciousness of the middle class in Bengal'.⁸³ She goes on to add 'important work began to appear in the Bengal vernacular instead, which had only recently been recognized as a full-fledged literary language'.⁸⁴

In the early decades of the twentieth-century, nationalists further conjoined the idea of the nation with the language; the use of English in the official documents, schools and universities became a contentious issue. While some argued in favour of English for its unifying powers, others rejected it as an oppressive foreign presence.⁸⁵ For leaders such as Gandhi, language became a political issue. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909) he vociferously condemns the use of English in the social space, claiming that 'it is the English education that has enslaved India'.⁸⁶ Later in his autobiography, published in 1927, Gandhi went on to comment on the ill-effects of English on the children. He wrote:

It has always been my conviction that Indian parents who train their children to think and talk in English from their infancy betray their children and their country. They deprive them of spiritual and social heritage of the nation, and render them to that extent unfit for the services of the country.⁸⁷

⁸³ Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002), p. 4.

⁸⁴ Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project*, p. 4.

⁸⁵ For further study see Amrit Rai, *A House Divided: The Origin and Development of Hindi/Hindavi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984). Paul Brass, *Language, Politics and Religion in North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

⁸⁶ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or India Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Karyalaya; 1938), p. 113.

⁸⁷ M.K. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 261.

Ironically, it is during this period that fiction writing in English gained momentum. A large number of new authors appeared on the scholarly surface, making their particular style, changing the language through different artistic responses.⁸⁸

In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986), Partha Chatterjee argues that the nationalism in Asia and Africa was not a simple western notion, but a regeneration of the indigenous culture that provided nationalism a distinctiveness.⁸⁹ After a detailed analysis of the term, he goes on to argue ‘that Nationalism denied the alleged inferiority of the colonised people; it also asserted that a backward nation could modernize itself while retaining its cultural identity’.⁹⁰ However, he is quick to point out that this powerful claim is based on the intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ that was primarily a construct of colonialism.⁹¹

Indian fiction writers in the early decades of the twentieth century faced a similar dilemma. While Indian writing in English was the result of cultural encounter and was particularly a by-product of colonial modernity, authors meticulously tried to reshape it as per “Indian” taste. At times, they also reacted to the changing political situation in the sub-continent through their fiction. While commenting on the role English in the formation of the “national literature”, Rosemary George argues that ‘English took on editorial and curational

⁸⁸ See Ruvani Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers in twentieth-century Britain: culture in translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian English Novel: History, Nation and Narration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Neelam Srivastava, *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel: National and Cosmopolitan Narratives in English* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

⁸⁹ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 2.

⁹⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, p. 2.

⁹¹ Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, p. 30.

position as it showcased what was understood to be representative of culture and cultural production in India in the mid-twentieth century'.⁹²

The two decades following the First World War were a period of tumultuous changes in India. With the arrival of Gandhi on the political scene, the nationalist movement took a new turn. The Punjab massacre of 1919 was the final indictment of the colonial government and led to massive protest. In 1920-22, Gandhi launched his first non-cooperation movement but soon called it off after the infamous *Chauri-Chaura* (1922) event in which several policemen were killed by the violent mob. In March 1930, Gandhi launched *salt Satyagraha* and later followed it with the Quit India movement in 1942.⁹³ Meanwhile, other leaders such as Subhash Chandra Bose were actively organising campaigns to remove colonial rule. Finally, independence came in 1947 but the partition of India into two led to massive dislocation, killing, and migration. The writers writing between 1930 and 1961 were the product of these radical political changes. This politically charged period has produced very fraught and politically important novels in English. I have, therefore, selected this period for my study.

At the same time many of these writers had received education in Europe and so the new wave of modernism profoundly influenced their writing. Irish nationalism and the works of the poets and authors such as W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and others inspired them to experiment with the language. Some of the writers writing in English used myths and folktales as a form of cultural nationalist protest; whereas others used it as a tool for innovation and experimentation. Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Sudhin Ghose and others went back to oral narratives to produce their distinct narrative forms, creating a new genre of Indian fiction in English. For them, folklore became at once an exercise in

⁹² Rosemary Marangoly George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 13.

⁹³ See Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Delhi: MacMillan, 1983); Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal ed., *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2011).

childhood memory, a significant tool of nationalist protest as well as a mode of experimentation with the fiction. Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand, among others, were constantly engaging with the vernacular folklore to experiment with the form of the novel as well as to make various political and historical points 'I wanted to write stories as finished in form and as rich in content as the stories told among my people. In fact, the folk tale form has seemed to me the most perfect form of short-story'.⁹⁴ Raja Rao, in the foreword of his *Kanthapura* (1938) famously noted that his novel was written in the conventional style of oral story-telling where a grandmother, while stretching her bedding on the verandah, tells her tale of suffering to a newcomer. Rao explained:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village—Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way past mingles with the present and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell.

[...] It may have been told of an evening, when as the dusk falls and through the sudden quiet, lights leap up in house after house, and stretching her bedding on the verandah, a grandmother might have told you, newcomer, the sad tale of her village.⁹⁵

Rao, here, explicitly explains that he wants to "tell" and not "write" the story. Hence, at a time when critics such as Walter Benjamin saw the end of the art of story-telling, the Indo-English novelists such as Raja Rao, Sudhin Ghose, and R. K. Narayan were re-creating this

⁹⁴ M.K.Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973), p. 132.

⁹⁵ Raja Rao, 'Foreword' in *Kanthapura* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938).

very art through the genre of the novel.⁹⁶ Benjamin famously observed in his essay 'The Story-teller', 'The decline of story-telling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of the modern era'.⁹⁷ While differentiating other art forms, such as the fairy tale, the legend and even a novella, he claims that 'the novel neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it'.⁹⁸ However, contrary to the claims of Walter Benjamin, the novel had often been a hybrid form, as in the case of the nineteenth-century British novel, where ballads were frequently drawn upon. Also, while analysing South Asian novels, Javed Majeed argues that the novel as a 'hybrid construct' should be seen in terms of the novel's 'plastic possibilities as a form'.⁹⁹ He explicitly points to the South Asian novels and calls them a 'genre in the making'.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, at the time when Rao and others were writing their novels, the Indian novel in English was a 'genre in the making'. Alert to the flexibility of the novel as a genre and aware of the robustness of the native oral culture, these novelists added a fresh layer of inter-textual complexity and innovation to novel-writing in English by extensively engaging with the folk tradition.

⁹⁶Sayan Chattopadhyay, 'Things of Stylized Beauty: The Novels of Sudhin N. Ghose and the Fragments of an Indian tradition', *Ariel* 3 (2012), 7-33 (p. 18).

⁹⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 83-110 (p. 87).

⁹⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', p. 87.

⁹⁹Javed Majeed, 'Literary Modernity in South Asia', p. 271.

¹⁰⁰Javed Majeed, 'Literary Modernity in South Asia', p. 281.

Multiculturalism, Inter-textuality and Cultural translation, 1930-1961



Fig. T. 6 R. K. Narayan. Courtesy self

(Photograph taken while visiting Narayan's house at Yadavgiri, Mysore)

In the photograph, R. K. Narayan is keenly reading *Graham Green's Reflections*. The moment speaks loudly about the early writers writing in English.¹⁰¹ Graham Greene and R. K. Narayan shared a unique bond. Though they mostly interacted through letters, both Narayan and Greene relished this relation. Brought up in a cosmopolitan, multicultural environment where Kannada and Tamil, Sanskrit and English co-existed with each other, Narayan enjoyed travelling the world and meeting people of different origins. His novels are mostly set in the Indian subcontinent but his writing bears the influence of the world literature. A similar negotiation with the different cultures of the world is prevalent in the

¹⁰¹ The period when Narayan and others were writing their novels was a period when the new colonial education and cross-cultural ties produced writers of cosmopolitan built. Recent studies have analyzed the various aspects of cross-cultural contact and transition between Indian and Britain. Shaftqat Towheed's edited *New Readings in the Literature of British India, c.1780-1947* bring in 'representative sample of the multifaceted literary and cultural traffic between Britain and India in the colonial period.' Similarly, Elleke Boehmer in her influential *Indian Arrivals* and Ruvani Ranasinha in *South Asian Writers in Britain* trace the impact of empire and intercultural relations. See Shaftqat Towheed ed., *New Readings in the Literature of British India, c.1780-1947* (Germany: Ibidem, 2014); Elleke Boehmer, *India Arrivals: 1870-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

writings of most of the Indian authors writing in English. While vernacular authors like Dilip Pillai translated literature in European languages into their native language, the writers writing in English often introduce the Indian context to the wider world. Mulk Raj Anand had, therefore, famously described Indian Writing in English as a bridge between “Ganga” and “Thames”.¹⁰²

The Indian writers writing in English are therefore often called “translators”. Salman Rushdie famously declared all British Indian writers as ‘translated men’.¹⁰³ Arguing in favour of translation, he opposed the traditional view that ‘something is lost in translation’.¹⁰⁴ G. J. V. Prasad goes ahead and calls all Indian writers in English as translators. He argues that the text that these writers produce are ‘translated’, ‘the very act of their writing being one of translation.’¹⁰⁵ But what do they translate? Critics such as Prasad argue that these authors translate the cadence of the vernacular language into English: the emphasis is mostly on the language. The thesis, however, moves beyond the debate over the language and argue that these authors translate and adapt the native folkloric genre into English to provide a sense of “Indian” form and context to the world. They form a “dialogic” relation between “oral” and “written”, “Indian” and “Western”.¹⁰⁶

Historically, myths have often been adapted to create new narratives. In the modernist period, the writers, painters, and cultural enthusiasts often adapted various mythologies to construct a new art form. James Joyce recirculated the canonized mythic narrative of Ulysses

¹⁰² Mulk Raj Anand, *Roots and Flower* (Dharwad: Karnataka University Press, 1972), p. 15.

¹⁰³ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homeland* (New Delhi: Penguin and Granta), p. 17.

¹⁰⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homeland*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ G. J. V. Prasad, ‘Writing Translation: Strange Case of the Indian English Novel’, in Susan Basnet and Harish Trivedi ed., *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 41-57 (p. 41).

¹⁰⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin started debate about the context in which a text is written. See Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, in Mikhail Bakhtin ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin; London: University of Texas Press, 1981).

through his novels.¹⁰⁷ Writing during this period and influenced by the new experiments in art and literature, Indian novelists, too, adapted the various vernacular myths and folkloric material to construct a new form of novel. Presenting an interesting example of “inter-textual dialogism” these authors recirculated as well as reinvented their culturally specific mythic narratives through the English language. Particularly, they relied on mythic and folkloric forms popular among woman. It is this adaptation of women-centric oral genres in their writings that makes appropriation a powerful critical tool to comment or examine national politics.

“Woman question” in early Indian fiction in English

“Speech” governs the world. Examining the power of speech, Edwin Ardner has proposed the theory of muted; however, he latter clarifies that the muted groups are not essentially “silenced” groups; they *do* express themselves but through an alternative speech discourse.¹⁰⁸ The women in South Asia are often considered speechless or voiceless. Earlier feminist conception, largely governed by colonial conceptions, considered women in South Asia as subdued. Miriam Schnier in *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (1972) declared that no feminist work emerged from Hindu purdah or Moslem harems.¹⁰⁹ Recent studies have begun to change the early feminist discourse. Contesting Schnier’s statement, Geraldine Forbes argues that it is ‘false to define women’s world as one which totally suppresses female agency’.¹¹⁰ Forbes rightly contests Schnier’s judgement by drawing attention to women-centric spaces that mostly create oral forms which in turn often protest

¹⁰⁷ Timothy Corrigan, ‘Defining Adaptation: The Layers and Movements of Adaptation’, in Thomas Leitch ed., *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). For further study please see Mireia Araygay ed., *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Inter-textuality, Authorship* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005); Timothy Corrigan ed., *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁰⁸ Edwin Ardener, “Belief and the Problem of Women” and “The Problem Revisited”, both in *Perceiving Women*, ed., Shirley Ardener (London: Dent, 1975), pp. 1-17 and pp. 19-27, respectively.

¹⁰⁹ Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. xiv.

¹¹⁰ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 5.

against women's seclusion and patriarchal subjugation. Woman (not all), hence, speak in South Asia, but in a different mode.

Since the introduction of English education in colonial India, the question of woman became a dominant part of the intellectual and political discourse. Annoyed and embarrassed by the continuous attack on the status of women by British missionaries and colonial administrators a number of social reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in Bengal, M. G. Ranade in Maharashtra and Kakundari Virasalingam Pantulu in South advocated for women's education and voiced their protest against female seclusion.¹¹¹ With the rise of fiction writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the writers started to construct women specific novels that discussed female issues.¹¹² With the arrival of Gandhi in 1915, the women's participation in the national movement gained momentum. Women participated in huge numbers in the non-cooperation movement (1929) and the subsequent Quit India movement (1942) led by Gandhi and his co-workers. A large number of feminist organizations were made to fight the issues relating to women's cause. Still, in early twentieth century women were denied sexual freedom and were encouraged to lead a life of restraint. Reform as well as later nationalist movement constructed a pervert model of Indian femininity and were aimed at controlling a woman's body.

The writers writing between 1930 and 1961, too, were deeply influenced by the debates around the question of Indian womanhood. Much like the fiction writers of the nineteenth century, these writers constructed powerful women characters in their fiction and responded to this discourse with particular enthusiasm. However, the feminist critiques have criticized the early Indian authors for relying overtly on the nationalist model for crafting women

¹¹¹ James Mill, in his influential *The History of British India* claimed "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women". See James Mill, *The History of British India*, 2 vols. (New York: Chelsea House, 1968), pp. 309-10.

¹¹² See Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

characters. Pointing out Indo-Anglian writers and poets' obsession with the mythic figure of Savithri, Susie Tharu condemns writers such as Raja Rao for putting the burden on the woman and the feminine in her for the aesthetic/metaphysical growth of the nation.¹¹³ A woman, she argues, thus becomes "a sacrificial figure" far removed from the material reality.¹¹⁴ Chaman Nahal in an essay entitled "Feminism in English Fiction" blames authors like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand for missing out a great opportunity of creating rebel woman who vociferously participated in Indian national movement. He writes 'they had freedom struggle and so many women in it to write about. They have bypassed our freedom movement which is a matter of surprise to some of us'.¹¹⁵ Carrying forward the argument of Tharu and Nahal, Teresa Hubel rebukes R. K. Narayan for confirming to the idea of Marriage and domesticity in his novels. She congratulates Narayan for writing about the *devadasi* movement but at the same time argues that though Rangi of *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1961) is a liberated woman, Narayan conforms to the prescribed models of femininity in modern India.¹¹⁶

The present thesis examines many of these critical questions. The writers writing during this period were the part of the intellectual discourse that continuously assessed the status of woman in modern India. These authors, too, responded to the issue according to their political lineation. I argue that these male authors appropriated women-centric cultural myths, tales or songs according to their individual choice. Susie Tharu is correct in pointing

¹¹³ Susie Tharu, 'Tracing Savithri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indian Anglian Literature', p. 263.

¹¹⁴ Susie Tharu, 'Tracing Savithri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indian Anglian Literature', p. 263.

¹¹⁵ Chaman Nahal, 'Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations', in Sushila Singh ed., *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English* (New Delhi: Prestige Books International, 2013), pp. 14-21 (p. 19).

¹¹⁶ Teresa Hubel, 'Devadasi Defiance and The Man-Eater of Malgudi', in *The Journal of*

Commonwealth Literature, 1/ xxix (1994), pp. 15-28.

out the anomalies in Rao's ideas on gender and sexuality in India. Rao often appropriates or misappropriates myths, songs and tales associated with woman to present a conservative view of Indian femininity; however, in his *Kanthapura* (1938) he integrates women into national politics through songs, tales and sayings. Also, there is a remarkable transformation in the Narayan's understanding of the "woman question". His early novels (most notably *The Dark Room*) adhere to the traditional view of Indian womanhood. He appropriates the mythical figure of Savithri to create a docile and submissive character of the same name, but later on, in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), he consciously draws on the "excessively erotic" mythic character of Mohini to construct his female heroine. In each of the chapter, I will discuss these issues and will show that how nation, gender and folklore intermingle and overlap to create a new kind of literary text.

Thesis Structure

The thesis has five chapters, each devoted to a single author. For long, folklore in India has been particularly associated with women and lower-caste. At times these forms of entertainment were discarded as "obscene" and "ugly", something beyond the purview of intellectual discourse. For a male of upper-caste origin, any engagement with such art was forbidden. The writers selected for my study breaks this old convention. They actively and consciously engage with the so-called "low" art forms to experiment with the genre of fiction. I have, therefore, selected these "modern", and "educated" male authors for my study to understand the various ways in which these male authors have engaged with the folklore to produce a new genre of fiction and construct the figure of the woman and draw upon, appropriate and even recreate women-centric spaces for their literary and political aims. What are the techniques adopted by these authors to adapt these folkloric genres? What is effect of such engagement on the text itself? Also, what is the politics behind such appropriation?

These are highly educated upper-class elite males writing in the language of the colonizers. Why do they harp on the women's world to construct their fiction? The focus therefore is on the male representations of mythic and oral culture, though it is often associated with women. Women writers in this period, by comparison, are fewer and would raise a very different set of questions and issues which are beyond the scope of the present thesis.¹¹⁷

The first chapter offers a broad examination of two novels of Raja Rao: *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). I examine Rao's preoccupation with myth and folk tradition and argue how the incorporation of these elements helped him to evolve a new art form. I focus on his engagement with the Kannada folk tradition in his first novel *Kanthapura* and its relation to issues of caste, gender and peasant politics of the period. Then I examine his employment of myth as a technique to work through a set of complex personal relationships in his second novel, *The Serpent and the Rope*. I have recovered available ethnography of the Kannada folk songs and the tales in these books to understand the intricate, inter-textual links between oral tradition and written text.

Chapter 2 explores the short stories of Mulk Raj Anand. In this chapter, I interrogate Anand's style of writing a short story in the form of "neo-folktale". I particularly look at the methods he employed to devise a new kind of short story. In addition, I examine the author's engagement with the songs and tales popular among women. Anand in his shorter fiction frequently draws on women's tales and songs. Examining the women-centric tales and songs, the chapter will thus evaluate the familiar but unexplored area of women-centric folklore. I have recovered the letters and prefaces of Anand to substantiate the argument. I have also

¹¹⁷ Women authors such as Begum Rokeya Hossain Shekhawat, Attia Hussain have used oral narratives technique in their novels and short stories. Sarojini Naidu has also used techniques of orality in her poems such as 'Planquin Bearer'.

researched the oral tradition of Punjab to understand Anand's immersion into his native folklore.

Chapter 3 explores the employment of a folktale narrative in the novel written in English. I explore Narayan's engagement with folklore, arguing that *The Man-Eater of the Malgudi* (1961) and some of his short-stories from *An Astrologer's Day* (1947) are fashioned in the style of regional folktales told in the inner household, famously described as 'akam' by A.K. Ramanujan. I have studied various folk narrative forms in the South Indian region to understand the narrative technique employed in the novel and have carefully scrutinized Brenda Beck's table of South Asian tales to identify the motifs and themes functional in the popular tales. The role of the *devadasi* (temple dancer) in the narrative provides insights into its gender politics. While investigating the historical facts related to the *devadasi* or temple dancer, I have delved into the reform and revival movement associated with these marginalized women performers in order to understand their representation within the novel.

Chapter 4 examines Sudhin Ghose's pre-occupation with Bengal folkloric tradition in two of his best-known novels: *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951) and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955). I analyse his various modes of engagement with native folk tradition and how it helps to create an alternative genealogy of modernism. Ghose's unpublished letters, diaries and memoirs, deposited at the British Library, are examined to understand his links with the folk tradition of Bengal. I also examine various folkloric forms- *jatra* and *kathakata* popular in Bengal - to understand the significance of their insertion in a literary text. I particularly examine Ghose's representation of the *Vaishnav bhakti* tradition of Bengal and how such engagement provides a counter text to the nationalist formulation of womanhood.

The final chapter deals with the novel *The Dark Dancer* by Balachandra Rajan, published in 1958. The novel is set against the backdrop of the 1947 partition riots as it traces the

relationship between V. S. Krishnan, a Cambridge-educated civil servant, and his wife, Kamala. The whole narrative plots the home-coming of an exile and his initial estrangement with his newly-wed wife. In this chapter, I am exploring the connection between a literary text and Tamil folk myth. I examine the role within the novel of the image of the dark dancer, Nataraj, popular in Tamil temple myths. I also investigate the representation of Kamala as folk Sita and the manner in which such employment modifies the classical image of the legendary heroine.

In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft comments on the traditional criticism and its contemporary use in Indian writing in English.¹¹⁸ Focusing solely on Sanskrit aesthetics and its need in the contemporary period, the authors declare India as largely a “text-based” culture. Continuously drawing on the development of a literary theory based on Sanskrit aesthetics, they long for a new “indigenous” theory that would counter the centre. What such an interpretation ignores is the vast oral tradition that shapes South Asian culture. No doubt India has fully developed aesthetics based on *Natya Sastra*, but when it comes to Indian authors writing in English, the emphasis, I argue, is more on the oral traditions these authors had imbued as children, often from their mothers and grandmothers. Ashcroft is absolutely correct to note that there have been few attempts to rigorously apply the traditional aesthetics and its concept to modern literature, but traditional aesthetics are by no means written to the textual. A theory based on folklore opens up a whole new world, and a rigorous study of the South Asian novel and its counter-mechanism can produce results that will shape the new theory for the enormous body of literature produced out of the cultural encounter. In the thesis, I have focused on the selected authors to recover the lost oral worlds

¹¹⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 116.

they encode, provide fresh interpretations of these novels, as well as to suggest a new line of criticism to read colonial/postcolonial texts born out of a profound cultural encounter.

Chapter One

Orality and Myth in the Novels of Raja Rao

While recounting the story of her village, Achakka – the narrator of the novel *Kanthapura* (1938) – suddenly remembers the ‘Harikatha Man’:

And it was on one of those evenings that they had invited Jayaramachar-you know famous Harikatha Man? They say he had done Harikatha even before Gandhi ... Today he says, ‘it will be the story of Siva and Parvati.’ And Parvati in penance becomes Siva, and Siva becomes heavens knows what! ‘Siva is the three-eyed’, he says, ‘and Swaraj too is three eyed’: Self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar.’

[...]And then he talks of Damayanti and Sakuntala and Yasodha and everywhere there is something about our country and something about Swaraj. Never have we heard Harikatha like this. And he can sing too, can Jayaramachar.¹

Through questions, digressions, mythological vignettes and historical details, Raja Rao introduces his readers to a popular form of Kannada folk tradition: the *Harikatha*. Literally, *Harikatha* means the ‘story of god’. Usually, a story from Hindu mythology is taken and the *Harikatha*-performer relates it through extemporized verse, accompanied by music and dance.² In India during the 1920s and 1930s, it was actively mobilised for the nationalist cause and used to spread the message of Gandhi in South India.³ What is interesting in the passage quoted above is the manner in which an oral mode of narration is evoked through textual references (‘Today he says ... he says ... he talks ... he can sing’) and direct speech. He

¹Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), P. 16.

² See Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (London; Mumbai: Orient Paperbacks, 2008 (24th edition); 1938), p. 14. For further details about *Harikatha* please see Amresh Datta, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, Volume 2, p. 1551.

³ See Amresh Datta, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 1551.

draws on the myth of Siva and Parvati in the *Harikatha* performance and combines it with contemporary national politics. Rao, thus, intermingles orality, myth, print and politics in one narrative and furnishes the socio-cultural context of his novel. Frantz Fanon in his *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) cites the example of Algerian story-tellers who modified their narratives according to contemporary struggle by incorporating new names and weapons into their narratives.⁴ The story-tellers in Algeria, in 1952-53 changed their traditional methods of telling and the themes of their tales to create an alternative political narrative.⁵ Oral tradition, thus, became a tool for the nationalist uprising. It is this modification of traditional oral forms for the national resurgence that is dramatically re-created in *Kanthapura* (1938). The story-teller Jayaramachar modernizes his narrative to include the contemporary struggle for political freedom and associates Gandhi with Hindu mythological gods. Indeed, the *Harikatha* plays a crucial part in the novel as it turns an orthodox conservative village into self-immolating 'Kanthapura'.

In this chapter, I shall examine Rao's preoccupation with myth and orality in two of his well-known novels, and argue how the incorporation of these elements helped him to evolve a new art form. The treatment of myth and oral traditions in these two novels is markedly different, dictated by very different sets of concerns. While in *Kanthapura*, Rao draws upon mythic tales as well as an oral mode of narration to evoke the Indian nationalist movement in a village, in *The Serpent and the Rope* (1961), he adopts a more allusive mode of narrative, incorporating various myths and legends, to represent his personal dilemmas. I shall focus on his engagement with the Kannada folk tradition in his first novel *Kanthapura* and its relation to issues of caste, gender and peasant politics of the period and then go on to examine his employment of myth as technique to work through a set of complex personal relationships in

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1961), p. 240.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 194.

his second novel *The Serpent and the Rope*. In the process, the folk aspect of his first novel is lost as he acquires a more sophisticated mode of writing that he calls 'Puranic form'.⁶ Further, I will explore Rao's conservative idea about Indian femininity which is exposed by the constant employment of the myths that validate woman as subservient to man. It is, however, important first to explore Raja Rao's exposure to and immersion in the local myths and oral traditions since his childhood.

Early childhood and literary influences on Raja Rao

Born in Mysore State in South India in 1908, Rao was educated in India and France. He lost his mother at the age of four and was brought up by his grandparents in Harihalli, a small village in South India. His grandfather was a Sanskrit scholar and had a deep influence on him. The young Raja Rao was immersed in Hindu religion and philosophy. While describing his familiarity with Hindu mythological figures, he once recounted:

My grandfather taught me Amara, that wonderful thesaurus which, like a grave and learned Brahmin boy, I had to learn by heart, and thus never have to ask who the two mothered one is of course he is Ganesha, or Kārttikeya, his brother, who is of course commander-in-chief of all armies.⁷

It was during this period that Rao was introduced to the popular folk tradition of Karnataka. He would have learnt about *Harikatha* and the various folk songs through his regular visits to the temples and religious festivals. The recitation of the 'story of God' is a

⁶ The form of writing which characterises the mythological Puaranas is referred to as Puranic form. The Puranas are a collection of sacred treatises, legendary in character, discussing the nature of the universe and the genealogy of Gods. See Theos Bernard, *Hindu Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 186.

⁷ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', *World Literature Today*, 62 (1988), 536-38 (p. 536).

popular activity even today in many parts of India. The tradition of performing the ‘story of God’ was popularised by Tulsidas during the fifteenth century.⁸ The performance and recitation of Tulsi’s *Rāmacaritamānas* were a popular activity in North India during the nineteenth and the twentieth century. In South India, the *Kātha* tradition was popularised by Kanakadas and Purandhardasa.⁹ In Karnataka the method of performing or reciting the ‘story of God’ developed as *Harikatha*. In addition to *Kathā* performance, the ‘Indra Sabha’ created by the poet Agha Hassan Amanat (1816-59) was popular during the later decades of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century.¹⁰ The ‘Indra Sabha’ was composed by Amanat Ali by assimilating Urdu *ghazals*, Braj Bhasha *thumris* and Awadhi folk songs to a narrative base drawn from several popular *masnavis*. Though originating in Lucknow – particularly in the court of Wajid Ali Shah - it was widely popular by the end of the century and was translated and performed in different languages.¹¹ It was twice translated into Kannada: it was first published by V. P. Guri Siddappa as *Indra Sabha Natakavu* in 1893 and later by Tateri Ranga Rav in 1916.¹² The young Rao might have known these translated performances during his childhood.

Rao subsequently moved to Hyderabad in the 1920s, but his association with the village continued. In his essay ‘Entering literary world’, Rao narrates his spiritual links with Harihalli or Hariharpura (the village) and its mythic tradition: ‘And from there [Hyderabad]

⁸ Tulsidas is the famous Bhakti poet and writer of *Rāmacaritmānas*. He was born in the fifteenth century and is credited for popularising the Ramlila plays. See Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmacaritmānas of Tulsidasa*, p. 56.

⁹ See Amresh Datta, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*, Volume 2, p. 1551.

¹⁰ ‘Indra Sabha’ was a performance composed by Amanat Ali. It is based on the court of Hindu God Indra (rain God). See Kathryn Hansen, ‘The Indra Sabha Phenomenon: Public Theatre and Consumption in Greater India (1853-1956)’, in Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney ed., *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 6-114 (p. 77).

¹¹ Wajid Ali Shah of Oudh (Awadh) was a generous and creative patron of the arts. He also supported performers and participated in different performances. Exiled by British government for his hedonistic lifestyle, Shah spent his later life in Calcutta.

¹² Kathryn Hansen, ‘The Indra Sabha Phenomenon: Public Theatre and Consumption in Greater India’, p. 98.

we went further still by bullock cart to the Malnad hills, where amidst rice fields and coffee plantation, we lived under the protection of Kenchammā, on the bank of the virgin Himavarthy'.¹³ After finishing high school, Rao went to Aligarh Muslim University to study English literature. Rao learnt French from Jack Hill, a Professor of French at the University, and was later invited by Sir Patrick Geddes to his newly established International College at Montpellier. Rao sailed to France in 1928-29 for higher education. There, he began his research on Indian Influence on Irish literature, while the old fascination with myths and folklore continued: he gradually came to know about the myths and legends popular in this ancient Greek and Saracenic town, close to Sete where Valery was born. He learnt about 'Beziers where there are still charred walls (so they said) at the place where the Albigensians were burnt by the Pope's helots'.¹⁴ In France, Rao also met the Irish poet Padraic Colum who introduced him to writers such as Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain. It was under their influence that Rao started writing his short stories. Rao had gone to France to do work on Indian Influence on Irish literature, but he soon abandoned his research and took up writing as his career. However, the knowledge of the Irish oral tradition and its impact on Irish nationalism stayed with him. He actively learnt from the Irish writers how to employ and evoke it in written form:

The Irish, remember, had done it [experiment with form and language] with Yeats, but again with Frank O' Connor and Sean O' Faolain. Further Joyce had broken in, as it were, from the side-wings, giving us sound and symbol structures that seemed made for almost unsayable.¹⁵

¹³ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 536.

¹⁴ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 537.

¹⁵ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 538.

Thus, both the mythic-oral narratives of Karnataka which he had heard as a child and the later influence of Irish folklore and the Celtic revival, facilitated by writers such as Yeats and Frank O'Connor, nourished his art. His early interest in myth and orality therefore continued in France. But there arose a new problem. He had initially tried to write in Kannada and had published some articles in *Jaya Karnataka*, a literary journal, and 'emerged out of this holy dip a new man, with a more vigorous and authentic style'.¹⁶ But he could not continue to write in his mother tongue. He noted:

A South Indian Brahmin, nineteen, spoon-fed on English, with just enough Sanskrit to know, I knew so little, with an indiscreet education in Kannada, my mother tongue, French literary scene overpowered me. If I wanted to write, the problem was what should be the appropriate language of expression and what my structural model- Sanskrit contained the vastest riches of any, both in terms of style and word wealth, yet it was beyond my competence to use.¹⁷

Rao received his early education at Nizam's school, an elite institution located in Hyderabad. The medium of education was primarily in English and, for him, 'English remained the one language, with its great tradition and its unexplored riches, capable of catalysing my impulses, and giving them a near-native sound and structure'.¹⁸ Along with this candid admission, he famously observed: 'we cannot write like the English. We should not ... we cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us'.¹⁹ And this 'large world' was a particularly exciting place just as when he was 'entering the literary world': it was a time of formal innovation and risk-taking. Experiments with form were going on in various literary circles: Kafka had broken 'the crust of realism and

¹⁶ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 538.

¹⁷ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 538.

¹⁸ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 538.

¹⁹ Raja Rao, Foreword to *Kanthapura* (London: Allen and Unwin), p. 1.

given fabled meaning to man's fear' while the Surrealists gave 'earth wings upward'.²⁰ To Rao, 'for an Indian, to integrate the Sanskrit tradition with contemporary intellectual heroism seemed a noble experiment to undertake'.²¹ It is interesting to note that Rao integrates not only Sanskrit (which has its own problematic politics, as we shall examine) but also the Kannada folk tradition with the contemporary 'intellectual heroism'. By 'intellectual heroism', Rao refers to experimentation with the form and style of the novel that was in practice during the early decades of the twentieth century. What we see in his writings of this period is an Indian sensibility expressed in the English language as well as an oral tradition woven into a written text.

Kanthapura was published in 1938 in London. Among the novels and stories that followed, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) brought him recognition as a major writer in English from the Indian subcontinent. The scope of the two novels and the use of mythic tales within them are very different. *Kanthapura* draws on folk tradition to evoke moments and processes within the Indian nationalist movement in a village in South India as Rao adopts what has been called the 'nationalistic model' in his first novel.²² The villages in India played a crucial role in forming national identity through reviving folk tradition; there was a definite politics to its use. One such example was seen in colonial South India through the 1880s and 1890s where folklorists such as Natesa Sastri (1859-1906) stressed the importance of folklore in a bid to re-invent the 'vanishing village tradition' and stressed its importance as 'national literature'.²³ Just like Sastri, Rao re-creates the image of a vanishing village through his engagement with the Kannada folk tradition in his first novel.

²⁰ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 536.

²¹ Raja Rao, 'Entering Literary World', p. 538.

²² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 14.

²³ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, p. 168.

By the time Rao wrote his second novel *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960); India had become independent. Myths and legends in this novel have a very different function; they are not concerned with the nationalist struggle and are no longer transmitted through the oral mode. Instead, they are employed at the level of allusion and metaphor for the exploration of personal relations. The narrative, unlike, *Kanthapura*, is set in London, France and Hyderabad, and the myths and legends are drawn from diverse countries and traditions. The telling of the tale is far more elusive, with 'one myth or legend' overlapping 'into another from a different culture'.²⁴ If *Kanthapura* is Rao's political novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* is his philosophical novel. If the myths served to depict the story of India's political movement in his first novel, stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, the life of Buddha and the Holy Grail are used to create a 'timeless backdrop' in his second novel.²⁵ In the latter, Indian history almost dissolves into the cosmic theme of illusion and reality and a metaphysical interpretation of personal relationships. India conceived through these associations is not a country with geographical borders, but an idea, a timeless entity of the 'spirit that is eternal' against which the main protagonists try to find out the 'truth'.²⁶

In a conversation with Katherine Raine, Raja Rao once noted:

India is the Kingdom of God, and it is within you. India is wheresoever you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. India is where you dip into you, and the eighteen aggregates are dissolved.²⁷

²⁴ Mukherjee Meenakshi, *Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi : Arnold-Heinemann Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,1971),p. 141.

²⁵ Paul Sharrad, 'Aspects of Mythic Form and Style in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*', in *Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 12.2 (1984), 82-95 (p. 87).

²⁶ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 173.

²⁷ Kathleen Raine, 'On the Serpent and the Rope', *World Literature Today*, 62 (1988), 603-605 (p. 603).

Whether it is because of his living abroad or sense of exile, he sees India as an imaginary land; the realism of *Kanthapura* is replaced by a certain allusive and symbolic richness in *The Serpent and the Rope* and the relationships between the characters are worked out on the basis of mythic parallels. But his construction of characters through these myths is deeply problematic; as we will see, the gender politics at work behind the employment of some of these myths is often unpalatable. It is within these different contexts that I will now examine the two novels of Raja Rao in order to understand and analyse his constant negotiation with mythic narratives and the oral traditions of India.

Caste, Gender and Peasant Politics: *Kanthapura* and the Kannada folk tradition

Kanthapura (1938) shows continuous engagement with the Kannada folk tradition.²⁸ The novel incorporates and adapts many of the motifs and narrative techniques of Indian vernacular tales and folklore to explore the impact of Gandhi's non-violence movement on the lives of the inhabitants of a small village in South India. An early review described the novel as 'disappointing ... despite the author's comprehensive knowledge'.²⁹ However, the text is now canonized as one of the foundational texts of Indian writing in English.³⁰ It is evident that the reviewers and the publishers of the period were engaged in producing a kind of text suitable to the English taste. Ruvani Ranasingha in her influential *South Asian Writers in Britain* (2007) has examined the letters exchanged between Rao and his publishers. The

²⁸ The folk tradition in the Kannada includes *Harikatha*, *Yakshagana*, *Janapada* tales and songs. The systematic study of Kannada folk tradition was initiated by Colonel Mackenzie in the eighteenth century, and later in 1888, J.F. Fleet published a collection of folk songs in series of articles called 'A Selection of Kaneresse Ballads'. In 1890 Reverend Kittel collected proverbs spoken in the area of Karnataka and published it with the help of another missionary Reverend Moeglin.

²⁹ Anonymous, 'Review of *Kanthapura*', *Times Literary Supplement* (26 March, 1938), p. 122.

³⁰ Ruvani Ranasingha, *South Asian Writers in twentieth-century Britain: culture in translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 31.

conversation shows ‘the pressure of an indisputable push towards Anglicisation, with the premise that the implied English reader will not be over-taxed’.³¹

Rao draws on the Kannada folk tradition to narrate the story of the legendary village of Kanthapura. The novel has two groups of people - village people and the coolies (peasants) at the Skeffington coffee estate. The village is divided into the Brahmin quarter, the Weaver’s quarter and the Pariah quarter. However, the recital of the life of Gandhi through *Harikatha* unites the whole village and turns an orthodox conservative village into legendary Kanthapura, where people sacrifice their lives and land for the freedom movement. The peasants at the coffee estate are mostly non-literate; the message of Gandhi is conveyed to them by the city-bred brahmin, Moorthy. Some of the peasants eventually join the freedom movement, and this transformation is illustrated through Kannada folk songs.

In particular, Rao draws on women’s songs, thus incorporating them as well as the tradition of folklore into his narrative of nationalist politics. In South Asia, there has been a long association between women and folklore, particularly through the representation of powerful deities and various tales and legends surrounding them. In addition to these, there are numerous folk tales and songs which are centred on women and are often narrated by them. A.K. Ramanujan has called them “women’s tales”.³² These tales help to find a feminine voice within a traditional patriarchal society. Ramanujan cites a popular South Indian folk tale – that of serpent lover.³³ The tale narrates how a serpent falls in love with a married woman and helps her to win back her husband from another woman. The serpent in human incarnation also woos her to have a son. In the end, the wife gets everything- a

³¹Ruvani Ranasinha, ‘Rao’s *Kanthapura* and Menen’s *The Prevalence of Witches*’, in Shafqat Towheed ed., *New Readings in the Literature of British India, c. 1780-1947*, pp. 279-300 (p. 289).

³² A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Toward a Counter-System: Women’s Tales’ in Arjun Appadurai et al. ed., *Gender, Genre and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 31-55 (p. 33).

³³ A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Toward a Counter-System: Women’s Tales’, p. 33.

husband, a passionate lover and a child. Hence, these tales, as discussed in the introduction, offered women a space to hear their own voices and represent a domain separate from that of established codes and practices. Some of these tales were narrated to young children by their grandmothers or older women. As I have already mentioned, Raja Rao lived his early life in a small village in Karnataka; therefore he would not just have been aware of these tales but would have experienced at first-hand this connection. When he decided to write *Kanthapura* in the style of a legend, he conveniently made the ‘grandmother’ figure the narrator of his novel. Interestingly in this process, the grandmother gives voice to her story and situates women at the centre of the narrative as well as of nationalist politics. But at the same time, his employment of various myths and oral traditions to depict contemporary history is imbricated, as I shall investigate, in a regressive politics of caste and religion.

The novel is set in Kanthapura, and this fictional setting is partly based in his village. Yet Rao explains in a letter to M.K.Naik: ‘The background is my village-Harihalli or Hariharapura, near Kenchamma, Hoskere Taluk, Hassan district, but nothing like this drama took place at Harihalli’.³⁴ Rao creates a fictional story while keeping his village in the background because, during the national politics of the 1920s and 1930s, the village played an important role. The village during this period was conceived by the nationalist intelligentsia as the repository of ‘tradition’; the ‘primitiveness’ of the village was often invoked to contest colonial modernity.³⁵ Indeed, it was the subject of intense discussion and debate. Thus, in a letter to Nehru in 1944, Gandhi noted ‘for me; India begins and ends in the villages’ even though, countering Gandhi, Ambedkar considered the village as ‘a sink of

³⁴ M.K.Naik, *Raja Rao* (Bombay: Blackie, 1982), p. 15.

³⁵ For further reading refer to Clive Dewey, ‘Images of the Village Community: A Study in Anglo-Indian Ideology’, in *Modern Asian Studies*, 6 (1972), 292-328 and Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Beginning in the early nineteenth century from Rammohan Roy’s recognition of India as ‘Land of Spirit’ to Swami Vivekanand’s advocacy of Indian spiritualism, the villages in India became a fundamental feature in representing national identity.

localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism'.³⁶ Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* actively participates in this re-discovery of the Indian villages and stresses its importance, in line with Gandhi's ideas, in the formation of national consciousness. Along with his fellow-novelist Mulk Raj Anand, Rao regarded the village to be the 'real' image of India. However, unlike Anand's, Rao's is a communal, caste-ridden and hierarchical notion of the village society; it excludes various groups of people from its centre. Rumina Sethi argues that 'Rao's homogenous tendency to represent brahmin sentiment in national politics raises questions about the degree of participation of the other religious groups and minorities in *Kanthapura*'.³⁷ For example, in the novel, the Muslim policeman Bade Khan 'had to suffer for being a Muslim' and Rao almost endorses this discrimination: 'being a Mohamedan he could stay neither in the potter's street nor in Sudra Street and you, don't of course, expect him to live in Brahmin Street'.³⁸ The villagers' fear of the man is mainly rooted in his occupation of a police man, but as Sethi claims it legitimizes imperial policy of divide and rule.³⁹ Unfortunately this might have been part of the social reality in many of the villages and thus part of the social realism of the novel, but there is no attempt anywhere by Raja Rao to critique it. Instead, what we find is a brahminical zeal and a sectarian vision, often propped up by the selective use of myths and oral narratives.

In the novel, the village community is divided into various quarters based on caste. The caste system is, unfortunately, a reality even in contemporary India, but was far more so at the time when this novel was written. It played a significant role in forming the very matrix

³⁶ Cited in Richard G. Fox, *Gandhian Utopia: Experiments with culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), p. 183. Also see Surinder. S. Jodhka, 'Nation and Village: Images of Rural India in Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (2002), 3343-3353 (p. 3343). Contradicting the idea of village constructed by Indian nationalists, M.N. Srinivas, in his detailed study of Indian villages, shows that 'each village has a pattern and mode of life that is to some extent unique'. M. N. Srinivas ed., *India's Villages* (Bombay: Asia Publishing house, 1955), p. 2.

³⁷ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 95.

³⁸ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 95.

³⁹ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 97.

of the Hindu society. Susan Bayly has argued that ‘by the early twentieth century, caste had acquired real meaning in the lives of most if not all Indians. The concept of the pollution barrier and the brahminical ideals of purity were familiar to most people in the subcontinent than had been the case in past centuries’.⁴⁰ This division among Hindus was problematic for the Indian nationalists since it came in the way of a unified protest against foreign rule. To achieve greater unity, Mahatma Gandhi during 1920s pursued a variety of solutions to uplift the depressed classes and the tribes. He established special ashrams (teaching and spiritual centres) for members of the serf-like field labouring community known as Dubla/Halpatis. In this period, Gandhi activists also protested against the bar for certain castes to enter temples. The two most significant examples of temple entry campaigns were around Vaikam in Travancore in 1924-5 and two Maharashtra temples in 1929-30.⁴¹ However, the solution pursued by Gandhi for the upliftment of the depressed classes was mainly religious, which is exemplified by his adoption of the neologism, Harijan, i.e. ‘child of God’. Critics of Gandhi have objected to this narrowly religious rather than social or moral stance of his because they were unclean and immoral due to righteous Hindu standard. The key opposition came from B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1950), who in his book *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) took a more radical and radically ‘un-Gandhian view of “uplift” for those demeaned by what he called ‘the poison of Brahminism’.⁴²

In his novel, Rao shows the unification of the divided Hindu society through the recitation of the age-old Kannada folk tradition of- *Harikatha*. Moorthy, who is a follower of Gandhi, organizes *Harikatha* in the village to celebrate *Ganesha*-festival, but this recital is different as it introduces the life of Mahatma Gandhi to the village folk. As already noted, the

⁴⁰ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 233.

⁴¹ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, p. 248.

⁴² Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*, p. 256.

Harikatha was a strategic method to mobilise Hindu community in the remote parts of Karnataka though the actual impact of these events is not known.⁴³ But, in the novel, the narration of the story of Gandhi through oral performance brings village folk to the centre of the nationalist discourse. Though they have never seen or heard Gandhi, the recitation of his life story impels them to be part of the freedom struggle. Before the oral recital, the narrator critiques Gandhi's view on the matrimonial relationship between a brahmin and a pariah but soon after the *Harikatha* performance, she becomes an admirer of Gandhi.⁴⁴ Moorthy invites people of every community to participate in the festival, thereby, dismantling caste hierarchies prevalent in the village society:

Moorthy goes on from house to house, and from younger brother to elder brother, and from elder brother to the grandfather himself, and – What do you think?– He even goes to the potter's quarter, and the weaver's quarter and the Sudra quarter and I closed my hand when I heard he went to pariah quarter. We said to ourselves; he is one of these Gandhi-men, who say there is neither caste nor clan nor family, and yet they pray like us, and they live like us.⁴⁵

Narrated from the perspective of the grandmother - a conservative and elderly figure - it shows the radical nature of Moorthy's act as he 'even goes to pariah quarter'. But, she soon realises that he is a Gandhi man, 'who say there is neither caste nor clan nor family'.

While Moorthy thus acts as a bridge between different social and even religious groups, the vision that he shares and champions is severely limited. The *Harikatha*-performer Jayaramachar compares 'Swaraj' with Lord Shiva. He says 'Shiva is the three-eyed' and 'so is Swaraj- self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity and Khaddar'. He goes on to discuss the

⁴³ See Amresh Datta, *The Encyclopedia of Indian Literature*, p. 1551.

⁴⁴ Rao, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Rao, p.15.

legend of Damayanti and Shakuntala, but everywhere there is something about the nation or Swaraj. Jayaramachar consciously replaces the 'story of God' with the story of the birth of Gandhi. Consider the following passage:

In the great Heavens Brahma the self-created One was lying on his serpent, when sage Valmiki entered, announced by the two door-keepers. 'Oh, learned sire, what brings you into this distant world?' asked Brahma ... 'Rise O God of Gods! I have come to bring you sinister news. Far down on the Earth you chose as your chief daughter Bharatha, the goddess of wisdom and well-being ... But, O Brahma! ... you have forgotten us so long that men have come from across the seas, and the oceans to trample our wisdom and to spit on our virtue ... O! Brahma deign to send us one of your gods so that he may incarnate on Earth and bring back light and plenty to your enslaved daughter.' And lo! When the sage was still partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him in the hospitality, there was born in a family in Gujarat a son such as the world has never beheld.⁴⁶

In this passage, *Harikatha* performer Jayaramachar narrates the story of the birth of Gandhi in a conventional Puranic style.⁴⁷ The oral performer knits together ancient myth and contemporary history. Phrases such as 'Rise up, O God of Gods', 'Oh, learned sire' or 'But O Brahma!' draw in the listener and recreate a sense of delight in oral performance through the written text. Here, the reciter narrates the tale of Lord Brahma (the creator) and Valmiki, the writer of the epic *Ramayana*. In this story, Bharat (ancient name of India) is personified as the daughter of the creator. The performer elaborates how 'men have come across the seas' to trample the nation. The performer, thereby, equates India with 'Sita', the legendary queen of the *Ramayana*.

⁴⁶ Rao, p. 17.

⁴⁷ The method of story-telling in which stories are often told by making parallel with mythic episode or event.

In the end, it is described that Brahma understands the uncertainties of Valmiki and a son is born in Gujarat to free the nation. To engage his audience, he goes on to recite the story of Krishna and equates him with Gandhi: ‘You remember how Krishna, when he was babe of four, had begun to fight against demons...So too, our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country’.⁴⁸ This conflation of Swaraj with Shiva or Gandhi with Krishna might have in the short run helped to mobilise the Hindu community but it is a cripplingly narrow and communal vision for the freedom movement of a country as diverse – in social, cultural and religious terms - as India. Similarly, while this oral narrative unites the village into what Benedict Anderson calls ‘an imagined community’ - Brahmins, non-brahmins, pariahs all join the Congress Party - the *Harikatha* itself is a Hindu oral tradition, implicated in the same ritualistic taboos and caste hierarchies it is here trying to dismantle.⁴⁹

Similarly in historical terms, Gandhi’s commitment to the upliftment of the depressed classes was limited to his nationalist politics; he never strongly questioned caste hierarchies nor conceived any long-term plan to eradicate it from the society.⁵⁰ Considered in this light, Rao’s complete idealization, or rather canonization of Gandhi is deeply problematic. A contrast on this point is his contemporary and fellow traveller Mulk Raj Anand. Towards the conclusion of *Untouchable*, published in 1935, the protagonist - the sweeper Bakha - rejects Gandhi’s views on eradicating untouchability, and instead considers modernity to be the solution of this problem. Similarly in *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), the protagonist Lalu, Ananda tells us, had not ‘expected the Mahatma to define his religion so narrowly as to call himself a Sanatani Hindu ... And he wondered how this man, who had been to Europe and

⁴⁸ Rao, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Please see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁵⁰ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 134.

who imbibed so much learning could talk like that'.⁵¹ But in Raja Rao there is no critique of Gandhi in any form; in spite of the unity across castes and occasionally religions, there is an endorsement of a traditional brahmanical vision through the references to the various Hindu myths. They also create a formal problem. While intricately worked out and textually fascinating, these lengthy stories and references somewhat stall the plot and distract us from the lives of the protagonists: the mythological layering, while adding texture and density to the narrative, takes away some of the immediacy of the novel.

Rao's depiction of the whole village abandoning caste, creed and hierarchy to come together in one nationalist upsurge can also be read against the broader history of Indian political agitation - particularly from the 'subalterns'. The peasants at the coffee estate in the novel are mostly non-literate, and the message of Gandhi is conveyed to them by Moorthy. He belongs to the upper caste elites in the village and has been to college for education. The novel, therefore, shows that the world of the actual peasants is devoid of any activism and they follow Moorthy, as well as the 'Hindu-belief system where ill-luck or destiny is accepted as inevitable'.⁵² However, various historical accounts of the nationalist movement illustrate a different perspective on peasant politics and their relation to the freedom struggle.⁵³ By no means were the peasants the apathetic, non-political community, as suggested by Rao, though it is important to note that their reasons for agitation were not exclusively nationalistic or religious. There were various motives other than nationalistic or religious causes which resulted in the peasant uprisings during the nineteenth century. One example was the Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 in Bengal, which was the result of coercive indigo farming.⁵⁴ The strikes and protests of the peasant involved hundreds of villagers who refused

⁵¹ Mulk Raj Anand, *The Sword and the Sickle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1942), p. 192.

⁵² Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 110.

⁵³ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 110.

⁵⁴ See Bipin Chandra et al, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989), pp. 50-60.

to pay high rents. Rao's novel, while conflating political activism almost exclusively with the educated Moorthy, partakes in the elitist narrative of Indian nationalism and ignores the complex and various strands of political resistance staged by the ordinary, non-literate peasants. Of course, many of these revolts were not directly anti-imperialistic and were concerned mainly with the immediate landlords – but nonetheless, they show a certain political awareness and culture of protest.⁵⁵

The peasants, during the 1920s and 1930s, would often appropriate the figure of Gandhi according to their conception but would deviate from his theory of non-violence: the actual impact of some of these nationalist meetings was very different from what happens in *Kanthapura*. One such case is illustrated by Shahid Amin in his essay 'Gandhi as Mahatma' where he shows that, when in 1921, Gandhi visited Gorakhpur, a district in eastern Uttar Pradesh, the Congressmen and local elite leader presented him as an 'avatar' and attempted to mobilize the local peasants through a religious perspective.⁵⁶ The peasants, while appropriating the figure of Gandhi, however used violent methods against their opponents, thereby, going against Gandhi's message of non-violence. They misconstrued Gandhi's message according to their needs, which becomes evident from Amin's illustration of the Chauri-Chaura event (1922) in which twenty-three policemen were killed.⁵⁷ As Amin notes, the volunteers chant 'long live Mahatma' in justification of the rioting.⁵⁸ It is not known how far Rao was aware of these events; they are largely absent from his narrative, perhaps written under the pressure of a nationalist agenda which did not highlight these tensions. But there is one telling depiction of violence at the estate in the novel after which Moorthy undertakes a

⁵⁵ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, pp. 110-130.

⁵⁶ Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern Up, 1921-2', in Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies*, vol.9 (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1982-97), 1-61.

⁵⁷ Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri-Chaura 1922-1992* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 46.

⁵⁸ Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory*, p. 46.

three-day fast to atone for the sin of violence. The clash occurs between the coolies and the estate manager Maistri when the coolies try to voice their concern over their condition in the estate, but Maistri does not allow them to move into the owner's house.

Some of the most sustained and imaginative uses of the oral tradition – particularly the *Janapada* songs – occur in the novel with reference to the consumption of and consequent restriction on the 'toddy juice'.⁵⁹ Rao depicts the peasants as rather inert and apathetic, fond of drinking the toddy juice. The narrator sings a *Janapada* song to describe the condition of the peasants at the coffee estate, particularly their addiction to toddy juice:

For once, you get there; the white, frothy toddy rises to the eyes, and as Timmayya's Madayya beats the drum and everybody sings,

Laugh, laugh, laugh away,
The King of heaven is coming,
He, the King of Heaven is coming,
Say, Bodhayya;
The King of Heaven is coming

Pot after pot toddy is brought to you and you drink, and you sway your shoulders this way, and that, and you cry out, 'well done, well done for Madayya!'

... And the King of Heaven is coming.⁶⁰

Rao might have heard these songs in his village in the 1920s or might have read them in magazines such as *Jaya Karnataka*; it is likely that he adapted and translated them himself

⁵⁹ Janapada is a word made up of two words Jana-pada- a kind of short verse joined together as Sandhi, a grammatical term. The *Janapada* tradition is described as the expression of the non-literate or semi-educated. It is mainly divided into three categories- long narrative song, small song sung by women and the Bhakti songs of Kanakdasa and Purandhardasa.

⁶⁰Rao, p. 59-60.

for his novel.⁶¹ The passage describes the evening recreation of the peasants: the peasants drink ‘pot after pot’ of toddy and dance to the music of the drum. The repetition and alliteration of the letter ‘L’ mixed with the vision of the mythical ‘King of heaven’ add flavour to the novel.

At the same time, the drinking of toddy juice was harmful, and peasants used to lose their hard-earned money because of their addiction. In fact, Gandhi made toddy-picketing part of the national movement. In *Kanthapura*, when Moorthy passes on the message of Gandhi to the villagers, some of them protest against the selling of toddy juices in the name of Mahatma. The narrator again draws on folksongs to describe this transformation:

Our King, he was born on a wattle-mat,
He’s not the King of the velvet bed,
He’s small, and he’s is round and he’s bright and he’s sacred,
O, Mahatma, Mahatma, you’re our king,
And we are your slaves.
White is the froth of the toddy, toddy,
And Mahatma will turn poison into nectar clear,
White will become blue and black will become white,
Brothers, Sisters friends and all,
The toddy tree is a crooked tree,
And the toddy milk is scorpion milk,
O King, O king, when will you come?⁶²

This song is an example of the adoration of Gandhi as God by the Congress volunteers and his impact on the conscience of the peasants during the movement. The phrase ‘Mahatma, you’re our king’ or ‘we are your slaves’, and the assumption that Gandhi will turn poison into nectar, illustrate the peasants’ complete surrender and loyalty to his message. This vision of Gandhi may be problematic and contested, but the episode is a fine example of Rao’s rich historicism: Kannada folk songs were in fact appropriated to compose songs for

⁶¹ It is to be noted that Rao translated his Kannada short stories into English. Therefore, it is probable that he himself translated these songs from Kannada to English. See M. K. Naik, *Raja Rao* (Bombay: Blackie, 1982), p. 1-15.

⁶² Rao, p. 145-46.

Gandhi and his movement. Even when the connection between the peasant uprising and Gandhian nationalism in the novel is debatable, the inclusion of these songs emphasises the agony, exclusion and aspiration of the peasants.

This method of integration of socially marginalized classes in the novel is not limited to untouchables and peasants, but actively includes women. Rao might have taken his cue from Gandhi himself. Indeed, in his protests against the selling of the toddy juices, Gandhi deliberately enlisted women to his cause. In the novel, too, protest against the selling of toddy-juices is integral to the movement. Volunteers of the Congress - men and women - directly approach toddy booths and ask people to leave it in the name of the Mahatma. For this, they compose a song based on a popular folk song of the village:

The toddy tree is a crooked tree,
And the toddy milk a scorpion milk,
And who is that uses scorpion milk, sister?
Why, the wondering witches of the marshes;
Say, sister, say the wandering witches of the marshes,
And the witch has a turban and a lathi stick,
O King, O King, why won't you come?⁶³

Responding to the unholy collusion of a traditional Brahmin with the colonial government, women sing the above song. The women describe the toddy tree as 'crooked'. The juice of toddy is compared to scorpion milk. The policemen with 'turban and lathi stick' are compared to witches. These images are usually found in the villages in India.

As already stated, women are foregrounded in the novel, particularly through the narrator, as well as Rangamma and Ratna, who are the forbearers of the movement. If the novel engages with Gandhi's (limited) efforts at the upliftment of the 'untouchables', there is also a strategic reworking of his views on the freedom of women. In order to understand this, it is

⁶³ Rao, p. 99.

important to briefly mention the historical context. Both Brahmin and non-Brahmin women equally participated with the men in Gandhi's programme. Women's movements had already started in late nineteenth-century India – particularly Bengal – but their participation in the freedom struggle on a large scale was initiated by Gandhi during the non-cooperation movement of the 1920s. The close relationship between women's movement and nationalist movement was highlighted time and again in the period through the powerful speeches and tours of his close colleague and ally Sarojini Naidu. When Congress declared April 6-13 as the Satyagraha week, women held meetings to show their support for the movement.⁶⁴ At one of these meetings, female Congress volunteers decided to form their political organization called 'Rashtriya Stree Sangh'.⁶⁵ Gandhi's message was particularly well received by women who were socially marginalised or ostracised such as widows or sex workers: Durgabai Deshmukh organized *devadasis* to meet Gandhi and they responded overwhelmingly to his message in April of 1921.⁶⁶ At the same time, as with his attitudes towards the untouchables or outcasts, Gandhi's responses towards women have been ambivalent, and as critics such as Rumina Sethi has argued, 'Gandhi never conceived any clear objective for women's upliftment'.⁶⁷ Indeed, his ideas about women and femininity could be strangely conservative and parochial, and have been increasingly subjected to the feminist critique. In a speech at Ahmedabad, Gandhi had said

If the workers find it necessary to send their wives and children to work in factories, it is our duty to see that they do not have to ... work is not for the children. Nor is it for the

⁶⁴ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 124.

⁶⁵ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 124.

⁶⁶ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 127. *Devdasis* (temple dancers) once held an exalted status but with time became the socially neglected group of Indian Women.

⁶⁷ Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 115.

women. They have plenty of work in their homes. They should attend to the bringing up of their children.⁶⁸

Women, in this formulation, are confined to their domestic roles. Gandhi's policies for women's involvement were strategic, tied to but without going beyond the nationalist agenda. For example, since women as a group suffered most from excessive drinking of their men, their inclusion in toddy-picketing within the national movement was a highly shrewd move. As Sethi continues rather bitterly, 'women's role in the national struggle was restricted to the issues of prohibition since they were the principal victims in this area'.⁶⁹

Whether it is a matter of influence or endorsement, Rao's representation of women and femininity shares Gandhi's blinkered vision. In *Kanthapura*, the struggle for the freedom in the village is fought under the leadership of two widows Ratna and Rangamma. Both of them defy social convention and join the Congress Party. Closely echoing the Rashtriya Striya Sangh, the women in the novel form an independent organisation for women called 'Sevika Sangh'. However, Rangamma, while addressing the members of Sevika Sangh, advises them to follow their primary duty of serving their husband and children:

'If we are to help others we must begin with our husbands', and she tells Satamma, 'your husband is not against Sevika Sangh. He only wants to eat in time ...Rangamma tells her to be more regular in cooking'.⁷⁰

The passage is almost an echo of Gandhi's speech, quoted above, and points to the insidious workings of a 'nationalist patriarchy' which, while allowing flexibility and limited role to women, followed a highly conservative gendered line.⁷¹

⁶⁸ M. K. Gandhi, 'Speech at Meeting of Mill-Hands, Ahmedabad', 25 Feb. 1920, in *Collected Works*, xvii (New Delhi: Government of India), pp. 49-50.

⁶⁹ Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 115.

⁷⁰ Rao, p. 152.

If men are associated with action, organising campaigns and distributing spinning wheels, women in *Kanthapura* are largely associated with folklore, myth and orality; indeed, oral narrative here works as a sign of their illiteracy, in sharp contrast to the educated Moorthy. Only Rangamma and Ratna are educated. While this is politically conservative, it may be argued in Rao's defence that it was an exercise in social realism: the literacy rates were significantly lower among women when compared to men, just as certain folk traditions were deeply associated with women. In fact, it may be added that the oral transmission of folk tales, songs, myths, proverbs and prayers by women allow Rao not only to bring them into the nationalist discourse and integrate them into contemporary struggle but invest them with a certain power. Thus, after the excommunication of Moorthy, the women condemn Bhatta (a character in the novel) for his cunning act and sing a song, usually sung to abuse in-laws. Rao brilliantly appropriates the song to suit his narrative:

Goddess, Goddess, Goddess Kenchamma,
The Mother-in-law has wicked eyes,
And the sister-in-law has a hungry stomach,
Betel –nuts never become stone.....

And Kanchi Narsamma adds:

Lean is the Brahmin-priest mother
And the fat is he when he becomes Bhatta, mother,
And he will take the road to Kashi,
For Gold has struck in his stomach⁷²

The song sung by women is instrumental in mingling the social and personal theme. The song encourages the villagers to enter politics and participate in the freedom movement. It

⁷¹ Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation*, p. 134. Also see Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's question', in Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid ed., *Recasting women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 116-135 (p. 247).

⁷² Rao, p. 100.

gives much of the emotional depth to the plot, facilitating the reader to see the change in Kanthapura at multiple levels. The source of this song is the Kannada folk song (Janapada) sung on the eve of marriage, birth, harvest, and so on. In this song, Bhatta is described as a 'fat brahmin' by the women. This phrase is commonly used to satirise the greedy Brahmins and therefore Kanchi Narssama, 'who had a long tongue', appropriates the song to ridicule orthodox Brahmin and his collusion with the colonial officers.

In addition to folk songs, Rao draws on proverbs popular in the Kannada region, and often, though not always, they are told by women. They are often used to comment on or ridicule others. Consider the following:

The sinner may go to ocean, but the water will only touch his knees.⁷³

This proverb is used by Achakka to ridicule Bhatta, the money-lender. Bhatta, also a brahmin, is a symbol of corruption, exploitation and betrayal in the novel. Achakka utters the proverb to condemn Bhatta's collaboration with the colonial government: indigenous tradition is here being drawn on to oppose collusion with the coloniser. On the contrary, there are proverbs used by Bhatta and Waterfall Vankamma to bring Moorthy to a sense of proportion. Rejecting the actions of Moorthy as a mere display of cunningness, Bhatta claims:

Well, every squirrel will have his day.

Bhatta is amazed to find that, even after excommunication, Moorthy is respected and followed in the village. Out of desperation, he uses this proverb to ridicule him. Waterfall Venkamma, too, is jealous of Moorthy and his popularity in the village. When Moorthy undertakes a three-day fast to atone for his sins, Venkamma criticizes him by exclaiming:

⁷³ Rao, p. 100.

The cat has begun to take to asceticism ... only to commit more sins.⁷⁴

Thus, Rao draws on the Kannada folk tradition for a variety of purposes, from the articulation of nationalist protests – as in the passages about giving up toddy – to the expression of petty village jealousies, and the women are his favoured mouthpieces. In fact, while the extensive use of Kannada folklore makes him push the boundaries of novel-writing, in political terms it helps him to incorporate women within the nationalist movement.

At the same time, the use of local legends adds a certain depth and intensity to the political narrative.⁷⁵ Towards the beginning of the novel, we are told about the origin of the Goddess Kenchamma. A legend is included to show that she had protected the village from the onslaught of a terrible monster: ‘Kenchamma is our goddess. Great and bounteous is she. She killed a demon ages ago, a demon that had come to ask our young sons as food and our young women as wife’. Further, a tale relating to the origin of the goddess is narrated by the grandmother:

Kenchamma came from the Heavens - it was sage Tripura who had made penances to bring her down –and she waged such a battle and she fought so many nights that the blood-soaked and soaked into the earth, and that is why the Kenchamma hill is all red.⁷⁶

Here, the simple grandmother-narrator describes the penance of the sage (as it is said) and provides a reason for the colour of the Kenchamma Hill; in an essay published in *World Literature Today*, Rao notes that Kenchamma is the ‘real goddess’ and is situated on the hills

⁷⁴Rao, p. 68.

⁷⁵ Dravidian gods and goddesses are typically local in origin. Even when one god/goddess is found in many places, the villagers do not think of it as a universal god but only as their local deity. Although there are a number of male deities, the majority of the presiding deities are female. The usual reason for worshipping them is the eruption of an epidemic disease like small pox or plague or of cattle disease. The villagers consider it as an expression of the anger of the goddesses. See Sasika C.Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1987), p. 50-51.

⁷⁶ Rao, p. 8.

nearby his village.⁷⁷ Further to this myth, the narrator Achakka sings a ‘Janapada’ song in praise of the local deity. These ballads or narrative songs in Kannada are lengthy compositions, religious or semi-religious in character; they were anonymously composed and passed by mouth from one generation to the other:

Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous,
Mother of earth, blood of life,
Harvest-queen, rain-crowned,
Kenchamma, Kenchamma,
Goddess benign and bounteous.⁷⁸

The song occurs at the beginning of the novel. Phrases like ‘Goddess benign and bounteous’ and ‘Mother of earth’ show the centrality of women in both the mythic and cultural consciousness even during their marginalisation in everyday life. While such songs, with their repetition, alliteration, organic images and word-compounds, move the narrative from the level of social realism into a mythic plane, it also provides one of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities – the village women – a strangely exalted status.

Technique, Style and Orality in *Kanthapura*

If the extensive use of myths and the oral tradition helps Rao to comment on the contemporary nationalist history as well as weave in women into his novel (even while exposing his conservatism and brahminical zeal), how do they formally affect the style of the novel? Javed Majeed has argued that ‘orality is often re-inscribed by the modern (South Asian) novelist by drawing upon the conventions of oral narration in texts’.⁷⁹ He further argues that ‘the silent feature of South Asian literary tradition is the way printed and oral

⁷⁷ Raja Rao, ‘Entering Literary World’, p. 536.

⁷⁸ Rao, p. 9.

⁷⁹ Javed Majeed, ‘Literary Modernity in South Asia’, p. 279.

forms co-exist in variety of situations'.⁸⁰ Majeed cites the example of Rausva's *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899) to explain the manner in which printed form interacts with the oral performance. If Rao extensively draws upon the Kannada folk tradition for a variety of reasons, as examined in the previous section, I shall now further investigate the constant and complex dramatisation of orality throughout the novel. What are the various techniques and stylistic features used to evoke the sense of oral performance in the novel?

Performance is the first and most basic characteristic of the oral narration.⁸¹ The uniqueness of performance lies in its ability to enhance or intensify experience.⁸² Therefore, a significant challenge for an author adopting the oral narrative form in his fiction is to re-create the delight of an oral performance in a written text. The role of the narrator in such novels becomes instrumental in re-creating flavour and delight of an oral performer. The narrator in *Kanthapura* is an old, unsophisticated woman who narrates the tale of her village as a trained story-teller. She weaves stories within stories to describe the battle for freedom in her village and its transformation from an orthodox conservative society to a village legendary for its enlightenment and self-sacrifice. The foreword itself presents Achakka as a traditional story-teller, a common figure in the village community:

It may have been told of an evening when as the dusk falls, and through the sudden quiet, lights leap up in house after house, and stretching her bedding on the verandahs a grandmother might have told you, new-comer the sad tale of her village.⁸³

Rao introduces not only the theme of the novel in the foreword but makes the figure of the grandmother its narrator. The repository of village tradition, she performs the function of

⁸⁰ Javed Majeed, 'Literary Modernity in South Asia', p. 279.

⁸¹ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 2.

⁸² Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidasa*, p. 115.

⁸³ Raja Rao, 'Foreword', in *Kanthapura*

a conventional story-teller. Her skill as a story-teller is evident in the opening pages in the way she describes the goddess Kenchamma and narrates the tale of her origin:

Kenchamma came from the Heavens - it was the sage Tripura who had made penances to bring her down - and she waged such a battle and she fought so many a night that blood soaked and soaked into the earth, and that is why Kenchamma hill is all red.⁸⁴

The Kenchamma-myth echoes some of the well-known stories of the country. The sage Bhagirath's penance to bring Ganga to earth as narrated in 'Ganga Purana' forms the mythic parallel with Sage Tripura's penance to bring the goddess. The narrator uses parataxis and one can observe the combination of gratitude and fear in her description of the 'mother goddess'.⁸⁵ Rao establishes the oral nature of the text through a number of narrative devices, from apostrophe:

'O! Kenchamma! Protect us always like this through famine and disease, death and despair. O Most high and bounteous!

to anaphora through a pattern of repetition with variation:

'We shall offer you our first rice and our first fruit, and we shall offer you saris and bodice-cloth for every birth and marriage. We shall wake thinking of you, sleep prostrating before you, Kenchamma.'⁸⁶

to the poetic description of the Kartik festival of light, as she directly addresses her listeners:

⁸⁴Rao, p. 8.

⁸⁵ A rhetorical term for phrases or clauses arranged independently: a coordinate, rather than a subordinate, construction. Use of parataxis is common in oral narratives.

⁸⁶ Rao, p. 3.

Kartik has come to Kanthapura, sisters - Karthik has come with the glow of lights and unpressed footsteps of the wandering god; ... the lights that glow from banana trunk and mango twigs; ... the night curls through the shadowed streets, and hissing over bellied boulders ... night curls through the Brahmin street and the pariah street and the potter's street.⁸⁷

The month of Kartik, considered auspicious by the Hindus, is described in detail by the narrator. The constant use of parataxis and anaphora - frequently found in folk songs and oral narratives – gives a poetic undertow. Chitra Sankaran observes that ‘the whole of life is viewed with this wondrous sense of magic – and the whole world is shrouded in this enchantment’.⁸⁸ Consider the following passage:

Darkness hangs drooping down the eaves; gods may be seen passing by blue gods and quiet gods and bright-eyed gods. And they pass the dust sinks back into the earth and night curls again through the shadow of the streets.⁸⁹

Words and phrases like ‘blue gods’, ‘quiet gods’, ‘bright-eyed gods’ or ‘the dust sinks into the earth’ create an aura of the supernatural. Apart from representing the mythic world of *Kanthapura*, the oral narrative also has a social dimension. As stated earlier, the narrator introduces the myth of Kenchamma at the beginning of the novel, but later this myth is used to evoke the figure of Gandhi as the protector of the nation. Kenchamma's significance is regional, but the association of this myth with the political movement helps Rao to weave together the stories of the village and the nation through the storyteller figure.

Like a well trained story-teller, the narrator presents the changing society of Kanthapura, intermingling the mythic past with contemporary issues. Consider the introduction of

⁸⁷ Rao, p. 87.

⁸⁸ Chitra Sankaran, *The Myth Connection* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd., 1993), p.38.

⁸⁹ Rao, p. 81.

Moorthy: 'Corner-house Narsamma's son Moorthy - Our Moorthy as we always called him'.⁹⁰ Moorthy is not a blind follower of religion and rituals: 'he is a thinker capable of taking decisions against established code'.⁹¹ The novel plots the transformation of the upper caste, city-educated brahmin youth to a radical social reformer who tells the village folk:

Brothers and this too ye shall remember, whether Brahmin or Bangle-seller, Pariah or Priest, we are all one, 'one as a mustard seed in a sack of mustard seeds' equal in shape and hue and all.⁹²

In this passage, Moorthy asks the village folk to adhere to the principle of equality through a well-known proverb – 'one as a mustard seed in a sack of mustard seeds' – to remind villagers that they are all one. The listeners are torn between their love for Moorthy and the age-old social conventions. Rao falls back again on the story-teller/narrator Achakka to point out the contradiction between the two factions:

The Mahatma is a good man and a simple man. But he is making too much of these carcass-eating pariahs ... We must stop this. This swami says he will outcaste every Brahmin who has touched a pariah.⁹³

This divide between orthodox and liberal brahmins results in the quarrel between Moorthy and his old mother. Moorthy is ostracized by Swami for his association with the untouchables, but even as an outcaste he is successful in spreading Gandhi's message and mobilizing the masses for the national movement. However, in the beginning, not even Moorthy can wholly overcome his prejudices and beliefs related to the brahminical tradition. Moorthy stands 'trembling and undecided, when Lingamma, a pariah, invites him to her hut'.

⁹⁰ Rao, p. 7.

⁹¹ Chitra Sankaran, *The Myth Connection*, p. 38.

⁹² Rao, p. 18.

⁹³ Rao, p. 21.

The narrator, as a mouthpiece for Rao, plays a significant role in discussing the conflict between the liberal and the orthodox brahmins.

At other times, Rao uses Kannada proverbs or phrases by translating them into non-standard English. Consider the following:

Nobody who has eyes to see and ears to hear will believe in such a crow-and-sparrow story.⁹⁴

The ‘crow-and-sparrow story’ is a well-known Kannada folk tale popular among children. Rao could have used its English equivalent, but he consciously derives this phrase from the Kannada folk tradition. The naming of the character is a significant aspect of an oral narrative. Names such as ‘Coffee-Planter Venkatanarayana’, ‘Waterfall Venkamma’ or ‘Carpenter Kenchayya’ are all deviations from Standard English. The modifiers used in conjunction with the names of these characters are of special significance.⁹⁵ In the complex organization of the village society, occupation is often caste bound. So the modifier ‘carpenter’ Kenchayya not only implies a specific profession but also lower caste. Similarly, there are other linguistic experiments in the novel. Consider the following example:

Kenchamma is our Goddess. Great and Bounteous is she

We can translate this sentence into Kannada and then back into English to understand the method of linguistic experimentation in the novel. Gemmill has conducted this experiment, and the result is as follows:

Kenchamma our Goddess. Great she, that asked (for) giving one she

⁹⁴ Rao, p. 27.

⁹⁵ G.J.V. Prasad, ‘Writing translation: a strange Case of Indian English Novel’, in Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi ed., *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 41-58 (p. 50).

To Gemmill, the second clause of the original sentence gives a basic pattern of a Kannada speech: adjective-verb-adjective.⁹⁶ So what we see here is the strategic use of the tale of Kenchamma to impart the rhythm of Kannada speech into the English language. Rao's engagement with the Kannada folk tradition, thereby, facilitates the linguistic experimentation in the novel. Thus, Rao's adoption of oral narrative technique allows him to create a new style of writing.

Letizia Alterno has argued that while 'Raja Rao is certainly not the first Indian author to have chosen English as the linguistic medium for his fiction, he is unquestionably the first Indian writer to manifest a conscious attempt to hybridize, transform through experimenting with idiomatic structure which is used in everyday Kannada, into its unique Indian- English, infused with "the tempo of Indian life"'.⁹⁷ But what is equally striking, if hitherto largely ignored, is Rao's extensive use of a more 'oral' style – in its political, social and narrative dimensions – and how it is fundamental to the process of 'linguistic hybridization' in the novel. The characters, including the narrator, do not speak English and therefore the author translates their everyday speech into English. Thus, in Meenakshi Mukherjee's words, there is a 'double complication' involved because it is written in a language that in most cases is not the first language of the writer nor is it the language of the daily life of the people about whom the novels are written.⁹⁸ In such a case, translation provides a double space for the author: s/he can retain the actual rhythm of the character's speech while writing in a language they do not speak. The translation of the folk songs and proverbs further creates a space between the vernacular Indian languages and British English.

⁹⁶ Janet P. Gemill, 'The Transcreation of Spoken Kannada in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*', *Literature East and West*, 18 (1974), 192-202 (p. 194).

⁹⁷ Letizia Alterno, 'A Narrative of India Beyond History: Anti-colonial resistance and Post-Colonial Negotiations' (Unpublished thesis, University of Manchester, 2008), p. 100.

⁹⁸ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 24.

“Myth as technique” in *The Serpent and the Rope*

In *Kanthapura*, Rao succeeds in his objective of finding a new art form by drawing extensively on the Kannada oral tradition and incorporating various folk tales and songs in his novel. His selection of the narrator is of great importance in this regard: the grandmother/narrator is one in whom ‘the mythical narration appears easy and natural’.⁹⁹ However, it should be noted that the style of *Kanthapura* cannot be generalised as the style of Raja Rao.¹⁰⁰ In his second novel, we see a significant departure from his early style of writing. *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), set in London, Paris and Hyderabad, is written in Standard English (though some critics argue that it incorporates Sanskrit rhythms into English language).¹⁰¹ Written after India had gained independence, Rao no longer draws on the local oral traditions and myths to suggest a sense of village community or contemporary history; instead, the whole narrative is interspersed with more classical mythological allusions and parallels borrowed both from Indian and European literature. This section will examine the treatment of myth in Rao’s second novel and how strikingly it differs from the style and function of *Kanthapura*.

In *The Serpent and the Rope* – as often in *Kanthapura* – the plot seems to be suddenly interrupted for the sake of a mythical tale:

Grandmother Lakhamma used to tell us Sweet story: once upon a time, where Dharmaraj ruled Dharmapuri, he had a young son of sixteen Satyakama,...who had to sent

⁹⁹ Chitra Sankaran, *The Myth Connection*, p. 44.

¹⁰⁰ B. Kachru, *The Indianization of English : The English Language in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), p. 77.

¹⁰¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 183.

away on exile because his stepmother wanted her own Son Lokmitra, to be placed on the throne...And Satyakama, beautiful in his limbs, he walked down the path forlorn, now asking for advice from a butterfly, and now from an elephant...Fascinated with its movement he followed and followed it...And in the cool of dusk, as the birds awakened to the waters, and the animals led out the little ones to their grazing and feastings, just as the round vegetable hit against a huge rock, big as a mansion, and burst apart. And from inside this budumékaya rose a young and auspicious princess whose beauty could blind the eye, and illumine the night. ... And when they bowed and stood aside, the budumékaya who had become a princess came from the door opposite, a garland of flowers in her hand ... and they [Satyakam and Princess] wed each other.¹⁰²

Within the narrative, the above story is highly significant. The narrator weaves stories within the main story to tease out the relationship between the two characters - Ramaswamy and Savithri. The Grandmother's story narrates the tale of prince Satyakama of Dharmapuri and a mythical princess. The Prince in the tale is banished by the King Dharmaraj. The story is told in an allegorical form where the banished prince asks for advice from a butterfly or an elephant. Later, the prince finds a mythical object and follows it for a long time. At last this object hits a huge rock and turns into a beautiful princess 'whose beauty can blind the eyes'. In the end, Satyakama marries princess and leads a happy life. The narrator, living away from his homeland in France, identifies himself with the banished prince 'Satyakama' of the tale and Savithri – an actual princess in the novel – is also the 'princess' of the tale. Just like the princess in the tale, Savithri appears suddenly in the life of the narrator. One realises how far Rao has travelled from the style of *Kanthapura*: the use of myth here is far more complex, working at the level of allusion and metaphor – and yet, some of Rao's caste and gender prejudices, as we shall see, persist.

¹⁰² Rao, p. 121.

The novel, often considered Rao's masterpiece, is a characteristic *ménage à trois*.¹⁰³ The narrator Ramaswamy is a South Indian Brahmin, living in France. He is married to Madeleine, a French historian, but is in love with Savithri, an Indian princess. The narrative begins with Rama's visit to India and his meeting with Savithri, who is unwilling to marry his friend Pratap. The death of the seven-month child has resulted into the breakdown of the relationship between Rama and his wife, Madeleine, and he feels the presence of his self in Savithri. Savithri, however, finally marries Pratap and Madeleine turns to Buddhism, renouncing all material pleasure, even her Rama. All these events create a sense of detachment (Vairagya) in Rama, and he realizes that only a guru can show him the way out of this cycle of love, marriage and death. Ramaswamy weaves stories within stories to narrate his failing relationship with his wife Madeleine, and his pre-occupations with his beloved Savithri. The whole narrative is intertwined with European and Indian myths and legends, which are used by the narrator to illuminate the complex relationships between the three main characters.

The reception of this novel has been mixed. 'Is this a novel at all? Is it not rather a book of wisdom, a compendium of interminable commentary and philosophising?' asked David McCutcheon in as early as 1975.¹⁰⁴ Other critics have accused the writer of "charlatanry". Klaus Steinvorth accuses Rao of faking Indianness and of pandering to the expectations of the Western reader.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, in spite of wide criticism, Rao continued to write his 'philosophical essays' in Puranic form for his readers.¹⁰⁶ Responding to these critiques in an

¹⁰³ *Ménage à trois* is form of relationship in which one partner forms a consensus relationship with two partners.

¹⁰⁴ David McCutcheon, 'The Novel as Sastra' in *Indian writing in English* (Calcutta: Writer's Workshop, 1975), pp. 90-101 (p. 92).

¹⁰⁵ Klaus Steinvorth, *Indo-English Novel* (Weisbaden: Steiner, 1977), p. 135-6.

¹⁰⁶ Harish Raizada, 'Point of View, Myth and Symbolism in Raja Rao's Novels', in K. K. Sharma ed., *Perspectives on Raja Rao* (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1980), pp. 157-76 (p. 194). Mulk Raj Anand

interview, Rao argued that it was wrong to apply conventional formal standards to a book conceived as 'Puranic' in form:¹⁰⁷

The Serpent and the Rope is to be taken like all my writings as an attempt at Puranic recreation of Indian story-telling: that is to say, the story as a story is conveyed through a thin thread to which are attached (or which passes through) many other stories, fables and philosophical disquisitions, like a *mala*.¹⁰⁸

It is this method of weaving stories within stories like a 'mala' (garland) that this section proposes to analyse. How does Indian story-telling, as Rao conceives it, negotiate with the standard ingredients of the novel form in the West? In order to write his novel in this style, Rao engages with various myths and legends from different civilizations. He often incorporates a myth or legend within the narrative to 'highlight a situation or the relationship between the characters'.¹⁰⁹ In *Kanthapura*, Rao borrows his narrative technique from the Kannada folk tradition which is very different from the elite Puranas.¹¹⁰ In his second novel, he adopts the Puranic method of weaving stories within stories or uses mythical metaphors to illuminate a situation. But such a method, as we will see, slows down the plot and the pace of the novel since Puranas are impersonal and objective narratives.

while criticising Rao's form of novel writing argues that Rao is 'anti-novel novelist, self consciously using the philosophical essay as part of the bardic form.'

¹⁰⁷ Please refer to p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ M. K. Naik, 'The Serpent and the Rope: The Indo-Anglian Novel as Epic Legend' in M.K.Naik ed. *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* (Dharwad: Karnataka University, 1972), pp. 272-306 (p. 276).

¹⁰⁹ Rajesh.K.Pallam, *Myths and Symbols in Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan* (Jalandhar: ABS publication, 1994), p. 55.

¹¹⁰ Purana means an ancient legend or tale of olden times. They are elite because they are mainly written in Sanskrit. The oldest of puranas, may date back to the sixth century, and some of the others may be as recent as the thirteenth century. Puranas are essentially diffuse and expansive and deal with almost every topic of interest to mankind. Thus, there are philosophical speculations, theology, and mythology all combined together within the expository narrative. 'Puranic form' is the method of story-telling in which stories are often told by suggesting parallels with mythic episode or event.

Before discussing Rao's treatment of myth in his second novel, it should be mentioned that *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) appeared two decades after the publication of *Kanthapura* (1938). In a letter to E. M. Forster, Rao declares his moving away from novel-writing as a result of his turning to metaphysics.¹¹¹ By the time this novel was published, the political context in India had radically changed: India was now an independent state. Many things also changed in Rao's personal life. He divorced from his wife Camille Molly, and Rao was left alone to bear the pain of separation. He wandered from one *ashram* (spiritual centre) to another in India in search of peace. He finally found inner peace in his teacher (Guru) Atmananda Swamy. Accordingly, Rao's employment of myth is no longer linked to any political struggle but rather used to explore the psychological dilemmas and moral conflicts in the relationship between Rama, Madeleine and Savithri.

At the same time, the lessons of the European modernism are only too apparent - particularly the influence of Eliot and Joyce whom Raja Rao would have surely read during his time in France. In his celebrated commentary on the use of myth in Joyce's novels, T. S. Eliot argued 'in using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others may pursue after him'.¹¹² Raja Rao, in his later novels, similarly, adopts myth as a technique to 'manipulate continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity', but, as I seek to show, this is not just a derivative strategy. In *Kanthapura*, it was the lived experience of the village community that he wanted to depict; in *The Serpent and the Rope* it is the unfolding of the complex personal relationship between Ramaswamy and Savithri.

Myths and legends from both India and Europe are often used simultaneously in *The Serpent and the Rope*. There is a constant attempt to find a connection between antiquity and

¹¹¹ M.K.Naik, *Raja Rao* (Bombay: Blackie, 1982), pp. 1-15.

¹¹² T.S.Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', *The Dial*, LXXV (1923), 480-484 (484).

contemporary society, downplaying the complexity of historical events and projecting a “history-less” world where past and present are fused and confused. For instance, the Tristan and Iseult legend blends with the love saga of Radha and Krishna. Similarly, he equates the actions of King Edward VIII with that of Bharat, the younger brother of legendary King Rama. Two isolated incidents, the exile of Rama and the exile of King Edward who abdicated his throne in favour of his brother, ‘one belonging to myth, other to history’, are fused.¹¹³ Therefore, the use of myth in *The Serpent and the Rope* is far more complex than in his early novel. But the question remains: to what purpose?

The narrator Ramaswamy is much more sophisticated than the grandmother-narrator of the *Kanthapura*, but the central love story, shot through with mythical tales, is deeply conservative. A bit like Raja Rao himself, Rama is the product of several cultures - born into the Sanskritised culture of South India, trained in France and writing in English. The names of the characters – Rama, Savithri and Madeleine – are taken from Indian and European mythology. Rama is the legendary king of the epic *Ramayana*, whereas Savithri’s name corresponds to the legend of Satyavan-Savitri narrated in the *Mahabharata*. The name Madeleine is associated with that of Mary Magdalene. The central myth of the novel is, however, derived from the *Mahabharata* legend of Satyavan and Savitri.

The relationship between Rama and Madeleine is complex. At the time when they married, Madeleine was twenty-six and Rama was twenty-one. Madeliene’s parents had died, leaving her an estate, which is looked after by Uncle Charles. Ramaswamy recounts: ‘Madeleine was so lovely, with golden hair - on her mother’s side she came from Savoy -and her limbs had such pure unreality’. Madeline married Rama, because she found him pure, ‘it

¹¹³ Rajesh K. Pallam, *Myths and Symbols in Raja Rao and R.K. Narayana* (Jalandhar: ABS publication, 1994), p. 55.

was Brahmin in me, she said, the sense that touch and untouch are so important, which she sensed; and she would let me touch her'. In this description, we again see Rao's brahminical zeal, here transposed not just to Rama but Madeleine as well. The new modern Indian state was formed on the principles of equality, which ruled out superiority of one caste or community over the other. While harping on the ancient traditional systems, Rao seems to be completely unaware of this new political structure.

The relation starts failing after the death of their seven-month child Pierre Krishna. The relationship further disintegrates after Rama's introduction of the myth of the Holy Grail and its association with Buddhist mythology: 'There is an old theory that the Holy Grail was a Buddhist conception- that the cup of Christ was a Buddhist relic'.¹¹⁴ Madeleine was fascinated by the idea of the Holy Grail but later abandons it to understand Buddhist philosophy. Madeleine's relationship with Rama is mixed with the glory and the agony of one which crosses the boundaries of race and nation, but the failure of the relationship creates a sense of detachment in her. Towards the end of the novel, she adopts Buddhism and renounces all material pleasure. In a letter for Rama, she declares:

My own future is settled. I want nothing: what I earn teaching will suffice me for a lifetime. So I have been thinking that Vera, and others who will come after her, should have everything. Anyway it all belongs to the family, my properties in the Charente, in Rouen, and even that plot of land in St Médard. I will just keep mother's house at Saintonge ... I am sure it would be wise to give Rama his freedom. He must marry someone younger from his own country...Rama must go back to his family; his lungs cannot bear our climate anymore.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Rao, p. 21.

¹¹⁵ Rao, p. 399.

She realises that she can never become ‘a true bride’ who regards her husband as god. She therefore settles her future by giving her belongings to Veera, her niece. However, she remains compassionate for Rama. She understands his wanderlust and expects that someone ‘younger from his own country’ can bring stability to his restless mind. Thus, what we see here is a parallel with the figure of Mary Magdalene: Madeleine in the end emerges as an epitome of sacrifice and self-perseverance. This conscious strategy on the part of the author, however, fails to generate narrative or dramatic interest. While trying to write his novel in Puranic form, Rao forgets that the Puranas, based on objective analysis, do not make the best model for fiction. The mythic parallel thus adds depth to the story but takes away from the narrative interest.

On the other hand, Rama, while wandering in his mythical world, attempts to find the figure of mythical Savithri in his wife Madeleine, but he can only see it in the Indian princess Savithri. Rao draws on the relationship of the mythical duo Satyavan and Savitri to suggest the budding relationship between Rama and Savithri. The relationship between the two as well as the parallel with the mythical Satyavan-Savitri is strengthened in an episode where Savithri performs a ritual in front of Rama in the presence of a coconut, kumkum (vermillion) and a flower:

Then she knelt before me, removed one by one my slippers and my stockings and put them aside gently-distantly. She took some flower and Kumkum, and mumbling some song to herself, anointed my feet with them. Now she lit camphor and placing the cencer in the middle of the Kumkum water she waved the flame before my face, once, twice, and three times in arathi.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶Rao, p. 213.

In the state of Karnataka, this ritual is called the *Jyotisthambha ritual*.¹¹⁷ Rao draws on the ancient ritual to discuss the personal relationship between Rama and Savithri, but the depiction of the scene is not wholly convincing. Meenakshi Mukherjee has argued that 'Rao creates an aura of vague emotionalism while depicting their relation'.¹¹⁸ She further notes how the identities of Ramaswamy 'as flesh and blood human being dissolves' when Savithri, the sophisticated Cambridge undergraduate, says to Ramaswamy: 'I wish you could sing me a song, and I would lie on your lap, far away where there is no father, no fiancé, no filigree, perhaps just a mother and on some mountain'. Rao portrays a very conservative view of Indian femininity through Savithri, who is contrasted with Madeleine. South Asian historians such as Dipesh Chakravarty have argued that Indian patriarchy in the nineteenth and twentieth century produced a paradoxical model of 'modern' Indian womanhood 'educated enough to appreciate the modern regulations of the body, yet modest enough to be unselfish and unself-assertive'.¹¹⁹ Savithri is a classic embodiment of this view: 'Savithri came with that sweep and nervousness of the modern girl' studying English at Cambridge but yet she is portrayed as unquestioning as she follows Rama's order to appreciate her 'Dharma' (duty) and enters into a loveless marriage with his friend Pratap whom she had initially rejected.¹²⁰ Thus, Rao appropriates the Hindu myth of Savitri-Satyavan to endorse the patriarchal image of woman as subservient to man: he considers 'Savithri' as a figure of sacrifice who follows the paths of Rama. In a dialogue with Savithri towards the end of the novel, Rama again alludes to the legend:

¹¹⁷ S.Nagarajan, 'A Note on Myth and Ritual in *The Serpent and the Rope*', in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, VII (1972), 45-48 (p. 47).

¹¹⁸ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 143.

¹¹⁹ Dipesh Chakaravarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?', in Padmini Mongia ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 223-247 (p. 235).

¹²⁰ Rao, p. 33.

‘Will you exchange places with me?’ I asked [to Savithri] ‘Yes, if you like this wretched cloak.’

‘How so?’

‘Then you, become me, will be the real Savitri?’

‘And Who is Satyavan?’

‘The self, the truth,’ I said and heaved a sigh. My stitches seemed sweet and tranquil to feel; they lived their own cutaneous existence. No Satyavan cannot die.¹²¹

The narrator in this episode asks Savithri to exchange his place. He is seriously ill and identifies himself with legendary Satyavan. Rama considers Savithri to be a mythical ‘Savithri’ who will bring her lover Satyavan back to life. Rama sees his own self in Savithri because she corresponds to the model of the perfect Hindu wife who ‘weds her husband as a god’.¹²² While the gender politics of the novel is thus deeply disturbing, it is also highly unconvincing. The passivity and subservience of Savithri seems unnatural for a Cambridge-educated, rather rebellious graduate.

Interwoven with the story of Satyavan-Savitri is the legend of Radha and Krishna. The Radha-Krishna myth is found in *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* and describes the relationship between Krishna and his playmate Radha. The story has mainly survived through oral transmission and was later popularised by Jayadeva, the medieval *bhakti* Poet in his famous work *Gita Govinda*.¹²³ The story is enormously popular in India and recurs in devotional songs, Vaishnava love lyrics, in novels of sentimental love, and more recently in popular films.¹²⁴ The relation between Radha and Krishna is considered as a symbol of divine love in Hindu religion and mythology. The Radha-Krishna legend forms one of the main motifs in the relationship between Ramaswamy and Savithri. In accordance to the legend, Rama and

¹²¹ Rao, p. 365.

¹²² He wants his woman to be Parvati, Shiva’s spouse, whose absorption into the male can recover for the man a state of primordial formlessness. See Uma Parmeshwaram, ‘Shiva and Shakti in Raja Rao’s Novels’, in *World Literature Today*, 62 (1988), 574-77.

¹²³ Jayadeva was a famous medieval Bhakti poet from Bengal. He is particularly known for his devotion to Lord Krishna. He was an important influence on later Bengali poets including Rabindranath Tagore.

¹²⁴ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 143.

Savithri do not marry, but are shown to be psychologically connected to each other. In a conversation with Ramaswamy, Savithri says:

‘Yes’, she said; ‘This Cambridge undergraduate, who smokes like a chimney and dances to barbarian jazz, she says unto to you, I’ve known my Lord for a thousand lives, from Janam to Janam have I known my Krishna.’¹²⁵

Interestingly, Savithri is a ‘new’ woman, who ‘smokes like a chimney’, but at the same time she connects herself with the ‘past’ and identifies herself as Radha. As with the legend of Savitri-Satyavan, this paradox raises questions regarding Rao’s notions of femininity. In India, the condition of women began to change during the course of the nineteenth century after various social reforms and cross-cultural contact with the British.¹²⁶ Now the concept of ‘perfect wife’ was redefined. The ‘new women’ as they were called, were part of a modernizing movement ‘which sought to modify gender relation’.¹²⁷ This shift was, however, neither abrupt nor permanent. Geraldine Forbes claims ‘many women, who briefly attended a school or emerged from purdah to attend a “mixed” function, returned to household where they continued to live in a more traditional fashion’.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, there were women who took advantage of education to forge their voice. The portrayal of Savithri as a highly educated woman but willingly embracing a traditional household (further established by her marriage to Pratap) neatly aligns Rao with the conservative, reactionary school of thought on issues of gender and women’s freedom.

¹²⁵ Rao, p. 214.

¹²⁶ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 28.

¹²⁷ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 29.

¹²⁸ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p.29. Forbes cites the example of Sarladevi Chaudhurani (1872-1954), a Bengali Woman from the famous Tagore family. After completing her education, she continued to work as educationalists, a patriot and a feminist.

Savithri's devotion to Rama creates a marked change in her character. In his presence, she becomes Radha, who has known her Krishna for 'a thousand of lives'. After the marriage ritual, Ramaswamy accepts her as his spiritual bride and presents her his mother's toe-rings:

And Lord knows himself because Radha is, else he would have gone into penance and sat on Himalaya. The Jumna flows and peacock feathers are on his diadem because Radha's smiles enchant the creepers and the birds. Radha is the music of dusk, the red earth, the meaning of night. And this, my love, my spouse' I whispered, 'is from my home. This is coco-nut, this betel-nut, this is kunkum and these toe-rings my Mother bare, and left for my bridal'.¹²⁹

This dialogue between Ramaswamy and Savithri marks a turning point in the novel. Here, Ramaswamy accepts Savithri as his bride. The 'toe-rings' that Rama offers her were originally meant for Madeleine. He personifies himself as Krishna and considers Radha to be his self. Further, the narrator constructs a mythic parallel between Radha and Savithri, considering her to be 'the music of dusk, the red earth, the meaning of night'. The episode, therefore, suggests Rama's moving away from his wife and his acceptance of Savithri as his bride. The identification of Rama and Savithri with Radha and Krishna is further strengthened by the interpolation of the *bhakti* song into the narrative.¹³⁰

Savithri sat on my bed, and the sun who had made himself auspicious presence fell upon her clear Rajput face as she sang Mira

Sadhu matha jā [...] Sadhu matha jā
O coenobite, O coenobite do not go.
Make a pyre for me, and when I burn,
Put the ashes on your brow,
O coenobite, do not go.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Rao, p. 214.

¹³⁰ The *bhakti* devotional songs sung in praise of Krishna or Shiva.

¹³¹ Rao, p. 215.

Mira's yearning for Krishna was similar to that of Radha, and while singing this song, Savithri is urging Rama to stay with her.¹³² The identification of Savithri as 'Rajput' (caste) further reveals Rao's preoccupation with questions of caste. Rama is personified as Krishna and Savithri considers him as her 'love and lord'. Having reluctantly married Pratap on Ramaswamy's advice, Savithri however reappears towards the end of the novel when Ramaswamy is in London and very ill. She comes to soothe him:

Then she would hum some song of Mira which brought peace, perfume, and elevation to that hospital room, and the sun seemed to shine the brighter, for a Rajput Queen could sing of Krishna in Brindavan.¹³³

In this episode, the narrator again depicts Savithri as a devoted lover. After this meeting, Rama acknowledges that it is not his body or mind that she wants but rather a state of existence for that union is not necessary. The Radha-Krishna myth however detracts from the power or warmth of the scene and instead creates, as Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, an 'aura of a vague emotionalism'.¹³⁴ Sudhin N. Ghose, another Indian writer writing in English, is far more successful when he employs the Radha-Krishna myth to evoke a similar love relationship in his novel *The Flame of the Forest*. In the episode from *The Serpent and the Rope*, the relationship between the two appears ritualistic without being sufficiently human. The substitution of a flesh-and-blood relationship with a mythical one is not always successful; as Mukherjee adds, 'a mythic parallel becomes significant only when the situation

¹³² Mira was the medieval Bhakti poet. She was originally a Rajput princess but later on became a devotee of Lord Shri Krishna.

¹³³ Rao, p. 367.

¹³⁴ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 143.

is primarily and recognizably human and real'.¹³⁵ The constant transition from one level of reality to another confuses the reader in *The Serpent and the Rope*.

If the myths of Satyavan-Savithri and Radha-Krishna were not enough, Rao also draws on the legend of Tristan and Iseult. While there are different versions of the legend, Rao's source of this legend is a narrative poem written by Thomas Le Trouvere, an Anglo-Norman poet.¹³⁶ The legend narrates the tragic tale of Tristan, the nephew of King Mark of Cornwall and Iseult, an Irish Princess. In the novel, Savithri is engaged to Pratap. Rama is sent to convince the reluctant Savithri to marry Pratap, but in the course of time Rama himself falls in love with her. He often feels like Tristan waiting for his Iseult. The narrator frequently refers to the story, as in the following passage:

King Mark of Tintagel awaited his Iseult. I would have given her to him, but having drunk the potion of Granval, I would meet her by brooks and forests; I would be torn by dragons, but some day we would lie in the forest, the Sword drawn between us. Some day love would be strong enough to shatter the rock of fragments, and we should be free to wander where we would, build an empire if we could.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 143.

¹³⁶ The Narrator reveals the source of the myth in the novel. Please see p. 360 of the novel. The legend narrates the tragic tale of Tristan, the nephew of King Mark of Cornwall and Iseult, an Irish Princess. According to the legend, Tristan is sent by Mark to convince Iseult about him, but Tristan himself falls in love with her. The rest of the legend shows Iseult's marriage to King Mark and Tristan's marriage to Iseult of the white hands. However, Tristan could not leave without his beloved and dies of grief, whereas Iseult, on hearing of the death of Tristan, dies immediately.

¹³⁷ Rao, p. 211. The potion of Granval marks turning point in the legend. Tristan convinces Iseult to marry his Uncle King Mark and takes her to the city Cornwall, but in the middle of the journey they drink the potion given to Iseult by her mother to please the King. The potion has a mystic effect on both of them and finally they express their love for each other. After her marriage to the King, Iseult flies away with the Tristan. One day Mark comes near the forest where they were hiding. Tristan and Iseult were sleeping, and Tristan had drawn sword between himself and Iseult. Moved by this innocence, as he takes it to be, Mark takes Tristan's sword and places his own in its place. Rest of the legend describes the repentance of the lovers, Iseult going back to the King, and Tristan's marriage to Iseult of white hands.

The narrator recounts this legend to suggest a complex situation. Savithri is engaged to Pratap, and he knows that he will have to give 'her [Savithri] to him [Pratap]', but Rama, like Tristan, seems to have drunk 'the potion of Granval'. So he hopes that someday love would be 'strong enough to shatter the rock of fragment'. In Chapter 17, again, we see the reference to this legend. Rama is seriously ill, and he feels like Tristan who could not find his 'self' in his wife and longed for Iseult.

Just as the castle of Tintagel, rounded itself and shone, on the rocks there, in the country of King Mark in Cornwall, Iseult gave herself unto Tristan, who through fire and forest, through torture and exile was to be her love. And when he went away and tried to warm his heart through another Iseult, Iseult of white hands, no warmth came for there was no love in him. So the ships brought the news of his illness and hopelessness to Iseult of Cornwall, and she took her boat and sped towards him. But when she came Tristan was just dead, and she lay beside him dead.¹³⁸

In this episode, in terms of the actual narrative, Rama is ill, and he is reminded of the love-lorn Tristan. Meanwhile, he receives a letter from Savithri, saying that 'she was coming over to England for the coronation with her father'. He hopes that Savithri will come to see him, just as Iseult rushed towards Tristan after hearing of his illness. The legend thus illuminates the inner longing of Rama for Savithri 'without creating an aura of vague emotionalism', as in the previous example of Savithri as the Rajput Queen, humming the song of Mira. Rao succeeds in communicating through this myth the complex relationship between Rama and Savithri.

¹³⁸Rao, p. 360.

At the same time, the tale of Tristan and Iseult is, in turn, interwoven with that of the Hindu myths. Consider the following passage which occurs when Savithri visits Rama in London:

[...] Trying to Solve the puzzle of history, like some hero in a fable, I had won a bride. A princess had come out of the budumekaye, but the moment I had entered the world of seven sisters the Prime Minister's son had led a revolution in the palace, had imprisoned the other six, and put us two under arrest. King Mark of Tintagel awaited his Isolde. I would have to give her to him, but having drunk the potion of Grandval I would meet her by brooks and forests.¹³⁹

In this passage, the narrator blends the grandmother's tale with the legend of Tristan and Iseult. The tale of King Dharmaraj and the prince Satyakam overlaps with the legend of Tristan and Iseult. The author in this episode consciously attempts to syncretise European and Indian legends. The narration of the episode by linking two different stories – one from India, the other from Europe – goes some way towards his stated motive of weaving the narrative like a 'thin thread to which are attached (or which passes through) many other stories, fables and philosophical disquisitions, like a mala'(garland). This is perhaps what Rao meant by the 'Puranic form'.¹⁴⁰

Moreover, he interpolates the story of Buddha and his horse Kanthaka to acquaint his reader with the idea of renunciation. According to the well-known story, Siddhartha (Buddha) leaves his beautiful queen and new-born son in their sleep and moves out in the darkness of the night in search of truth. He is followed up to a distance by his horse, Kanthaka. Later on, Kanthaka is reborn as one of the disciples of Lord Buddha:

¹³⁹ Rao, p. 211.

¹⁴⁰ M. K. Naik, 'The Serpent and the Rope: The Indo-Anglian Novel as Epic Legend', in S. K. Desai and G. S. Amur ed. *Indian Writing in English* (Dharwar: Karnataka University, 1968), pp. 214-48 (p. 276).

And when they reach the river Ganges, Kanthaka kneels to the Lord and says ‘Lord may this poor creature too, be permitted to come? And the master says, ‘I go thither Kanthaka, whence there is no returning’, and then he departs on a journey from which there is no returning. Kanthaka goes back to Kapilvastu and dies immediately to be reborn and return to the compassionate one, a disciple, an Arhat.¹⁴¹

The myth from the Buddhist mythology is an example of the manner in which mythic narrative overlaps with the philosophical issues in the novel. In this episode, Rama is facing a dilemma as he is unable to comprehend his relationship with his wife, Madeleine. The presence of Savithri in his house at Aix-en-Provence further complicates his situation. He feels a sense of detachment and while brooding over his situation he recounts this myth. Indeed, myths and legends from various parts of the world – the legend of Satyavarta, the Chinese fables of Wang-Chu and Chang Yi (127-128), the legend of Cathars, as well as philosophical fables by Ramakrishna Paramhansa – are interpolated to discuss the philosophical questions of illusion and reality raised in the novel.¹⁴² In addition to several myths and legends, Rao also engages with the Kannada folk songs sung on the eve of marriage. The interpolation of folk songs is occasional in the novel, and lyrical passages are quoted from Dante and Sankaracharya to Mira Bai.

As we have seen, in *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rao intricately weaves stories within stories to illuminate and add depth to the relationship between Ramaswamy and Savithri. His use of myth is complex and often overlaps with the philosophical musings of the characters. This method has invited a fair amount of criticism and adverse comparison with his first novel:

¹⁴¹ Rao, p. 70.

¹⁴² Ramakrishna Paramhansa was a nineteenth-century spiritual leader from Bengal and teacher of Swami Vivekananda. Advait Vedanta of Sankar considers this world to be an illusion.

Kanthapura is a modern novel, and its oral tradition is a well-chosen technical device. *The Serpent and the Rope*, on the other hand, unearths metaphysical propositions everywhere; hence, interweaving of myths instead of steadily illuminating a particular situation, merely adds to the flux of the general observation about cosmic truth.¹⁴³

The observation made by Meenakshi Mukherjee is partly justified, and makes one compare the two novels in their employment of myths and legends. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao's engagement with nationalist politics through folk tradition is convincing. His use of the grandmother as the narrator is a well-chosen technical device: her incorporation of nationalist politics in her tales facilitates the unfolding of the narrative in the style of oral story-telling. In *Kanthapura*, Rao deals with the larger issues of freedom struggle, but in his second novel, he indulges in emotional extravagance through his exploration of personal relationships; in the process, he ends up glorifying his brahminical origin and demeaning woman. His gender politics, in both novels, is problematic: in *Kanthapura*, the women are, however, empowered through the use of folk songs and proverbs. Rather strikingly in the second novel, published some twenty years later, Rao's ideas of womanhood seem to have become even more conservative. The construction of Indian femininity in the later novel is chauvinistic: the myths are used to represent women as subservient to man. In the process, he also indulges in elitist narratives, making constant references to Kings and Queens in a post-Independence India. The portrayal of the love relationship between Savithri and Rama through the Radha-Krishna legend often results in a 'vague emotionalism'. However, as we have discussed, the use of the legend of Tristan and Iseult to refer to the lover's plight is successful. Raja Rao can be brilliant in negotiating with oral and mythic traditions within the narrative fiction, but he often fails to be insightful about the larger issues of caste and gender in the modern India.

¹⁴³ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 143.

Chapter Two

Folk Imagination and Singing Women in the Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand

In the preface to the *Indian Fairy Tales* (1946), Mulk Raj Anand explains his idea of a modern short story in the following manner:

Only by going back to the form of these stories, told by mother to son and son to son, could we evolve a new pattern for the contemporary short story. Of course, the modern short story is a highly developed folk tale, if it is a folk tale at all. But a revival of the short story form, like the present, seemed to be a fit occasion to relate it to its more primitive antecedents which surprisingly enough, seem to lie in the source of the sheaf of tales which I have gleaned ... Although I have taken in much new psychology into my own writing of the short story, I have always tried to approximate to the technique of the folk tale.¹

One of the striking features of Anand's style is his liberal mixing of the modern and pre-colonial narrative forms. He tells us about his narrative strategy, but in doing so, he raises multiple questions. In what way is the short story a highly developed folktale? If it is a developed folktale, why does it require any revival? Surely, in this bold statement, lies a desire to find a new style of writing that blends the ancient 'technique of the folktale' with insights from modern psychology. This is an intellectual as well as formal tension that runs throughout Anand's work - the relation between 'Western influences' and his attachment to a folk idiom and culture going back to pre-colonial India. This predicament speaks loudly through the preface, where he advocates a new form of short story. It is around this time that

¹Mulk Raj Anand, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1946), p. 1.

folklorists such as Vladimir Propp were arguing that the novel and short story were intimately connected to the folktales.² But still, he accepts that the folk tale does not have the kind of plot structure that we find in modern fiction.³ In contrast, Anand links the short story with the oral tales. He seems aware of the intricacies of the synthesis between the so-called primitive and the modern; still he considers them very similar to each other. He seems convinced that a new form of short story can be constructed by going back to the oral tales narrated by women. Hence, like Raja Rao, Anand recovers and deploys, I shall argue, folk techniques of story-telling to generate new narrative modes.⁴ In some of his shorter fiction, he includes folksongs to articulate the voice of the peasant, but this function in narrative fiction goes beyond this. The songs, in fact, are part of a major structural pattern in Anand's fiction. They represent a strategic method by which Anand weaves the shape and feeling of traditional literary forms into his fictional medium. Song serves almost as what Kathryn Hansen calls 'a verbal structural medium' with a variety of use.⁵ As we shall see, the songs reflect and comment upon the surrounding story material, intensifying mood and providing an ironic commentary to it.

In this Chapter, I explore the synthesis of the old and the new, particularly the construction of the short story as a 'neo-folktale', a term devised by Anand to describe his idea of short fiction.⁶ Examining short stories such as 'The Lost Child' and 'Five Short Fables', I explore Anand's experimentation with the form of fiction. What are the methods employed to achieve such a hybrid model? Also, continuing my focus on women and folklore from Chapter 1, I analyse Anand's representation of the subaltern, particularly peasant

²Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, p. 18.

³Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, p. 18.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', p. 87.

⁵ Please see Kathryn Hansen, 'Song and Structure in Renu's Fiction: The Pattern and function of Song in three works', *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 17 (1982), 153-62 (p. 154).

⁶ M.K.Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand* (London: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973), p. 132-33.

women, through folk songs. But before analysing the stories and the songs, it is important to discuss Anand's association with the Punjabi folklore and the manner in which it shaped his imagination.

Orality, Women, and Tales

Born in 1905 in Peshawar, Anand was the third child of Ishwar Kaur and Lal Chand, a clerk in the 38 Dogra Regiment of the British Army. Anand's mother, Ishwar Kaur, was from a traditional peasant background, who was engaged to his father when she was only eight years old. In his autobiographies, Anand vividly portrays his parents. What emerges from this depiction is the contrast in the character of the two individuals and the manner in which it shaped Anand's early childhood.⁷ The empire loyalist and socially aspiring Lal Chand was initially, for the young Anand, a hearty man with an ambition to see his sons pass the school examination and work in the service of the Sarkar. But as Anand grew up into an anti-colonial socially minded young man, his attitude towards his father underwent a deep reversal: a change from hero-worship to a repudiation of all that he stood for. His mother remained the abiding influence on the writer. While Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan drew inspiration from their grandmother's tales, Anand specifically relied on the tales told by his mother. At once imaginative and deeply spiritual, she narrated various stories to Anand and taught him to respect all religions. Her shrine included the figures of Vishnu, Yessu Messih, the Buddha and the Agha Khan, 'who was the incarnation of Krishna and Vishnu and Rama and head of the Ismaili sect, who claimed descent from the Prophet Mohammad and was Household God of our Coppersmith's caste'.⁸ She had copies of *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Japji*,

⁷ For detailed discussion please see Saros Cowasjee, *So Many Freedoms: A Study of the Major Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁸ Saros Cowasjee, *So Many Freedoms: A Study of the Major Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 10.

and *Koran*. Asked about the variety, she used to respond ‘hesitantly’: ‘The God behind all of them is the same’.⁹

In his autobiography *Seven Summers*, Anand records, ‘occasionally, he [Prithvi, younger brother] would open his eyes and stare at me while he sucked at my mother’s breasts, as though he was saying to me, ‘Hands off my Mother’s breasts!’¹⁰ This sensuousness shaped the creation of many of his female characters, and in a conversation with Saros Cowasjee, he observed that it was from his mother that he learnt ‘love for the woman. Mother fixation. In love with every woman, who is Mahalaxmi, Mahakali and Mahasaraswati’.¹¹ It was from his mother’s side of the family - his mother, his uncle Dev Dutt and his maternal grandfather, Nihal Singh - that Anand inherited his anti-colonial nationalist sympathies.¹² If his mother’s revolutionary ardour fired his anti-colonial feelings, what he gained from his mother most, though, was her deep love of folklore: indeed, love of the nation and literature blended into each other as her recitals of songs, tales, myths and epics of the village community generated in him an awareness of the rich Punjabi folklore. Anand would describe his mother as ‘a non-literate but highly skilled story-teller who could feel a situation passionately’.¹³ While describing his mother’s intuitive understanding of people, Anand recalled that once, as a boy, he was accompanying her when they met a woman who had just lost her son. His mother stopped to talk to her, but young Anand became impatient and insisted that they leave. When they arrived home, she said to him: ‘Why did you rush me like that? Didn’t you see the dead

⁹Saros Cowasjee, *So Many Freedoms*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Summers: The Story of an Indian Childhood* (London: Hutchinson International Authors LTD, 1951), p. 13.

¹¹ Saros Cowasjee, *So Many Freedoms: A Study of the Major Fiction of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 13.

¹² It was also through his uncle Dev Dutt that Anand came in touch with new nationalist ideology. Uncle Dev Dutt, through oral narratives of the nationalist leaders, introduced young Anand to the idea of nation and nationalism.

¹³ M.K.Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand* (London: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973), p. 132.

son of that woman in her eyes?’¹⁴ In the *Seven Summers*, Anand recounts his mother’s art of story-telling in detail:

My mother had a vast fund of folk tales, having heard them in her childhood from her own mother, as legends, fables, myths, and other narratives of gods and men and birds and beasts ... So sure was my mother’s gift for storytelling, so vivid her manner, so wonderful her sense of character that sometimes I found myself rapt in her tales with an intensity of wonder that precluded sleep and left me tossing in bed ...for long afterwards.¹⁵

Anand fondly recalls the variety of the tales, songs, myths, and other narratives of gods and men that he heard in his childhood. Her stories enchanted Anand; he pestered his mother for more: ‘Oh mother, tell me a story!’ And then after she had been continuously asked, she would sit down and tell the story of the queen who was turned into a rose by a witch or the tortoise who talked too much, or about the wicked moneylender who was outwitted by the shrewd farmer. Such tales charmed Anand, and took him deep into the world of imagination:

And I would look out through the chinks of the doors to the sky where the stars stood silent, without a gleam, a glitter or a throb, and felt enchanted, afraid with the memories of monsters and fairies, laughed to myself over the folly of the tiger who let himself be deceived by the jackal and the crocodile who came to grief through the sly cunning of a fox, lay spellbound by the adventures of the daredevil heroines, till the weight of fatigue closed my eyes even against my will, while mother was still half through her tale.¹⁶

Such was the influence of his mother and her tales. One of the tales that influenced Anand most was that of Raja Rasalu, an exciting narrative of how a young prince issued forth from his palace against the wishes of his parents, fought the demons, became an ascetic, and finally

¹⁴ M. K. Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 132.

¹⁵ Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Summers: The Story of an Indian Childhood*, p. 166.

¹⁶ Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Summers: The Story of an Indian Childhood*, p. 166.

won the hand of a fairy princess by defeating her father at chess. The tale ‘fired Anand’s imagination’ and he would ask her to narrate the story again and again.¹⁷ Long after, in 1977, Anand accepted that his ‘trilogy traces itself to the adventures of Raja Rasalu which happened some centuries ago in the same Sialkot district to which Lallu belonged’.¹⁸ Anand explains that the ‘hero comes through in spite of his own people’s weakness’.¹⁹ Anand was also very close to his aunt Gurdevi. She was the wife of Babu Chattar Singh, the Quarter master’s clerk in his father’s regiment. She was ‘a little demure woman’ with a voice like that of ‘a cooing dove’.²⁰ While explaining his encounter with the aunt, Anand recounts: ‘But as I could not settle, Gurdevi would put me in her lap and rock me to peace to the tune of a lullaby [...] I was conscious of the sensuous pleasure of being fondled by Gurdevi’.²¹ It is the ‘sensuous pleasure’ of both the tune and the tactile embrace that travel into the ‘lyrical stories’ such as ‘Lullaby’. The song sung by Gurdevi profoundly affected Anand and her sonorous voice kept on ringing in his memory. Later on, these voices shaped the writing .

Mulk Raj Anand travelled to London in 1925.²² Before arriving in London, he was involved in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1920-21. He had read M. K. Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* at school, and on joining Khalsa, he participated in Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement and went to jail for a brief spell. The speech of Annie Besant in 1924 stirred deep nationalist feelings in him, and consequently he again went to jail for a month for participating in an anti-colonial protest. After his release, his parents decided that he must leave India and go abroad for higher education. During his stay in Europe, Anand kept up his

¹⁷ Anand, *Seven Summers: The Story of an Indian Childhood*, p. 166.

¹⁸ Atma Ram, ed., *Anand to Atma: Letters of Mulk Raj Anand* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1994), p. 26-27.

¹⁹ Atma Ram, ed., *Anand to Atma*, p. 26-27.

²⁰ Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Summers: The Story of an Indian Childhood*, p. 19.

²¹ Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Summers: The Story of an Indian Childhood*, p. 19.

²² Susheila Nasta is currently working on a project called *Beyond the Frame: India-British Connection*. Also see Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers in Britain*.

interest in folklore, almost as an exercise in intellectual resistance - both plebeian and nationalist - to the Eurocentrism of the modernist movement, with its emphasis on narrative fragmentation and linguistic density.²³ In a letter written in 1977, he explains how, ‘in my case, the dark gods of the Indian earth were not forgotten, because Mr Eliot lectured against the dark gods. The admiration for D.H. Lawrence had sustained the passion for folk in me as well’.²⁴ The unexpected and acute reference to D. H. Lawrence shows how important this fiery working-class writer, with his cult of the body, the senses and primitive gods, was to colonial intellectuals such as Anand.²⁵ Along with D.H. Lawrence, the Irish writers also influenced Anand. He went to Ireland in his twenties and experienced the Abbey Theatre led by W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Lennox Robinson. He saw there for the first time a play by Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge’s *Riders of the Sea*, which moved him deeply. He also saw the plays of new Irish dramatists such as Sean O’Casey, and read the novels of peasant life by Paeder O’Donnell, Liam O’Flaherty, Sean O’Faolain and others. Thus, his long association with folklore continued during his years in Europe and was revived in the 1930s when he lived for a year in Kangra in the Punjab (1938) and then in Kalankar in U.P. (a state in India). Thus life trajectories of Anand and Rao seem to collide in multiple ways. While Rao moved to France, Anand sailed to Britain, but coincidentally their choices and influences were similar in many ways, however, at times one sees difference in their ideological lineation.

Anand started his writing career in the 1930s. Like Rao, Anand also faced a similar dilemma while trying to publish his writing. Anand faced multiple rejections; it was only after E. M. Forster wrote a preface to his first novel, that he could publish *Untouchable* in 1935. Later on, his *Two Leaves and a bud* (1937), was banned in colonial India. The subject

²³ See, for example, Michael Levenson ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) for discussion of some of the stock features of European modernism.

²⁴ Atma Ram, ed., *Anand to Atma: Letters of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 17.

²⁵ Amit Chaudhuri, *D. H. Lawrence and ‘Difference’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

of the novel threatened the colonial establishment to the extent that a reviewer declared it unpalatable and unbelievable on publication. Ruvani Ranasingha argues that India authors received positive attention only from the Indian scholars. While commenting on Rao's *Kanthapura*, she claims 'it is primarily to Indian scholarship that did justice to these authors, providing close readings of the text and encoding of the decade's tensions and developments that were visible by the time *Kanthapura* was published in 1938'.²⁶

While explaining his narrative style and association with the oral tales, Anand, in a letter written to Atma Ram on January 12, 1977, confessed that he began writing under the influence of his mother. Urging the young scholar to explore the inter-textual links between his writing and the folklore, he insists:

I felt for the first time, you could go to the sources of the alleged non-literary material and bring to surface the consciousness of those in the labyrinthine depths, I mean the folk. It may help you to know that I began my writing career by rendering Punjabi folktales told to me by my mother. I think the folk tales of our country are some of the most perfect literature of the unlettered life and the in-betweens of feelings of people, with a vital sense of life and death. In the trilogy, *The Village*, *Across the Black Waters* and *the Sword and the Sickle*, you will find much wisdom of the heart in the talks of the peasants.²⁷

What we see in the letter is an urgency to unravel the complex and interwoven links between Anand's fiction and the oral narrative. What Anand is implicating here is the fact that though the peasants or even women are non-literate, they are not non-literary.²⁸ They have their own literary consciousness that hides within the 'labyrinthine depths'. Word of

²⁶Ruvani Ranasingha, 'Rao's *Kanthapura* and Menen's *The Prevalence of Witches*', p. 283.

²⁷ Atma Ram, ed. *Anand to Atma: Letters of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 18.

²⁸ While mainly focussing on the storytellers, William Heston emphasises that though they are non-literate they are literary. Please see William L. Heston, 'Footpath Poets of Peshavar', in Arjun Appadurai et al ed. *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 305-43 (p. 306).

mouth is an essential medium of expression and creates an alternative literary world. Deeply immersed in the native folk tradition, Anand acknowledges the vitality of the oral source and the manner in which it is neatly associated with the peasant discourse. Later, while explaining his definition of the short story Anand observes

When I read some of the stories of Tolstoy in his *Sevastopol Sketches* as well as Gorky's stories *Creatures That Once were Men*, I began to conceive the short-story as I would write it, by combining the framework of the folk tales with concentration on character and situations of contemporary life...Altogether the allegory, the fable, the lyric short story, the satire and the long story, in my hand, are all, in a peculiar style of my own evolved under various influences, typical of the neo-folk tale, which is my ideal of short-story.²⁹

Anand, here, draw on the writers who were immersed into their native folk tradition. He refers to Tolstoy and Gorky, confirming that he began to conceive a form of short story that blended the ancient oral narrative forms with the modern genre. For him the ideal of the short story is 'neo-folktale'. Immersed in the songs, tales, myths, and bardic narratives of Punjab; Anand vows for a distinct style of writing. He calls such a hybrid model a 'neo-folk tale', a term devised to integrate folk with the modern. It is this new concept of short story that I will now examine.

The Short-Stories as 'Neo-Folktale'

Punjab has a wide variety of oral tales. Excavating the oral sources, Farina Mir shows the 'literary formation' of Punjab through the recitation of qissas (stories), the singing of *Shabads*

²⁹M.K.Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 132-33.

(devotional songs) or plays in village fairs and festivals.³⁰ As early as 1971, Sohinder Singh, while commenting on the variety of folklore in Punjab, argued that folklore is an inevitable part of Punjab, particularly in villages and both young and old ‘virtually live on it’.³¹ The world famous *Panchatantra* (a collection of animal tales) is particularly popular in Punjab.³² In addition, a collection of tales based on Sanskrit *Katha Sarit Sagar*, tales of *Alif Laila*, and a famous Arabic collection of fables, *Kalila wa Dimna* is celebrated in this region. The oral narratives revolving around the sad plight of immortal lovers form a major part of the folk tradition of Punjab. The villagers rejoice listening to the stories or even the folk songs based on them. Very popular are Waris Shah’s *Hir and Ranjha*, Pilu’s *Mirza Sahiban* and Hashim’s *Sassi Punnu*. These narratives form part of the literary tradition but are also passed on to one generation to the other through word of mouth. Among them, *Hir Ranjha* and *Mirza Sahiban* are among the most popular love legends of medieval Punjab, and ‘despite their temporal and geographical distance they are a part of the living culture of the contemporary Punjab’.³³ While the events of the two legends are said to have taken place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively in the areas now in Pakistan, they are a source of countless Panjabi sayings, proverbs and folk songs and fascinate the contemporary creative mind which frequently returns to them in poems, plays, and even in films.³⁴ Mulk Raj Anand, as noted

³⁰ Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 94.

³¹ Sohinder Singh, *Folklore of the Punjab* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1971), p. 86.

³² Sohinder Singh, *Folklore of Punjab*, p. 96.

³³ Pankaj K. Singh, *Re-Presenting Woman: Tradition, Legend and Punjabi Drama* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 2000), p. 46.

³⁴ William L. Heston, ‘Punjab’, in Margaret A. Mills et al ed., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopaedia* (Routledge: London, 2003), pp. 495-96 (p. 495). Punjabi popular literature began coming into print as chapbooks and many of these were printed in Lahore. Early Punjabi chapbooks of narrative verses (qissa) included romances of *Hir and Ranjha* (by five authors with at least thirteen printings between 1871 and 1883), *Sassi and Punnu* (Six authors with thirteen printings between 1862 and 1882), *Mirza and Sahiban* and *Sohni and Mahinwal*. Most popular quissas were Dulla Bhatti’s attempt at revenge against Emperor Akbar, the resistance of the Hindu Prince, Puran Bhagat, to his stepmother’s attempt to seduce him, and a series of adventures of Raja Rasalu to which Anand frequently refers. Some

above, was deeply entrenched in these popular folkloric texts. While writing his stories; he particularly goes back to these oral narratives.

In addition to his celebrated novels, Mulk Raj Anand also published a number of short-story collections. *The Lost Child and Other Stories* came out in 1934, whereas *The Barber's Trade and Other Stories* was published in 1944. Among others notable are *The Tractor and the Corn Goddess and Other Stories* (1947), *Lajwanti and Other Stories* (1966) and *Between Tears and Laughter* (1973). These short stories are not well-known, and yet, among his admirers, they are regarded as some of the finest short stories from South Asia, with their 'the great variety of theme and mood, tone and technique'.³⁵ Jack Lindsay rightly argues that in the early stories, particularly from *The Barber's Trade*, 'he felt for new strands of method and material linking the folk forms and their poetic resources with contemporary issues'.³⁶ Anand's range is wide, and the craftsmanship lies in dealing with different subjects with objectivity. The themes of his short stories are not limited to rural or urban India, but go beyond the fixed paradigms, often challenging the set norms and social prejudices. In this section, I examine Anand's engagement with the oral narratives, analysing his idea of the short-story as a "neo-folk tale". What are the various methods employed to create a new form of short story? What are the devices employed to form this amalgamation?

'The Lost Child', published in 1934, in the collection *The Lost Child and Other Stories*, shows a unique synthesis of the folk tale with the contemporary prose writing. In the story, Anand draws on child psychology. The story is a metaphorical rendition of Guru Nanak's saying that 'we are all lost child in the world fair'. The whole narrative discusses the

chapbooks, such as *Lyla* and *Majnu* (at least five printing by three authors from 1860 to 1877), *Shirin Farhad*, and martial tales (jang-nama) about events related to Karbala, had sources in the Perso-Arabic tradition outside South Asia.

³⁵M.K.Naik, *Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann India, 1973), p. 9.

³⁶Jack Lindsay, *Mulk Raj Anand: A Critical Essay* (Bombay: Hind Kitabs Ltd., 1948), p. 26.

wandering of a little boy and his behaviour in a village festival. The village street is crowded with sweets, balloons and toys but the child has no money to buy them. The young boy, though, is unable to suppress his desire. He knows the old, cold stare of refusal in his parents' eyes, but still, he pleads, 'I want that toy'. His father looks at him with red-eyes, and he retires to his mother who is tender and gives him her finger to catch. The boy again looks at different objects in the *mela*. The sights of a flower-seller with gulmohar, a juggler playing a flute to the snake and a man holding a pole with yellow, red, and green balloons, excite his imagination. He wanted to have the garland and was carried away by the rainbow glory of the silken colours. He wants to hear the juggler's music but is afraid of his father, and so he drops the idea of buying or seeing anything. He again feels despondent. But suddenly he loses his parents; lost in a chaotic world, he finds himself amidst the strangers: 'He turned to look at his parents. They were not there. He turned to look on the either side. They were not there. He looked behind. There was no sign of them'.³⁷ Tears roll down his face; a deep cry bursts within his dry throat. He starts running, crying 'Mother, father'. He reaches a holy shrine. A man in the crowd sees him crying. The man goes to the child and asks about his parents. The child keeps on crying. The man tries to "soothe" him and takes him to every shop he had earlier visited. Like R.K. Narayan's Swamy, the child seeks freedom; he has a desire to see the world through his eyes.³⁸ But the parents have their choice, and he has to follow it. However, when he is lost, the worldly desires dissuade, and the only people he wants are his father and his mother.

Fairs are the essential part of the Punjab folk tradition. A number of fairs such as *Chhappar* and *Jarag* fair are organised throughout the year. The author sets his story within the context of this popular folk tradition. Also, Anand draws on the folk tale device of

³⁷Mulk Raj Anand, 'The Lost Child', in M.K.Naik, ed., *Selected Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977), p. 40.

³⁸ R.K. Narayan, *Swami and his Friends* (London: Arnold-Heinemann, 1935).

repetition to show the transgressive behaviour of the child. In the first part of the story, whenever the child goes off the road, his mother calls, ‘come, child, come’. Persuaded by her affectionate calling, he follows her but again loses her sight. Again mother says, ‘come, child come’. The calling of the mother becomes a significant moment in the narrative: the voice of the mother binds him to the corporeal world. When he loses his parents, the phrase changes, and the child, again and again, repeats, ‘I want my mother, I want my father!’

In the colonial period, the Urdu poets often incorporated pre-colonial narrative forms within even state-sponsored literary texts. Farina Mir argues that the Punjabi texts produced during the colonial period have revealing traces of orality.³⁹ One significant oral narrative technique is the continuous repetition of a line within a text. While examining Khawish Ali’s *Hir-Ranjha*, she shows that the line: “Make me your devotee [faqir], oh Guru”, closes each of the poem’s first eighteen-stanzas, displaying a deep co-relation between text and performance.⁴⁰ Similarly, Fassi Niaz Ahmad repeats: “your love o beautiful Hir, has made me a sufferer in this world” ten times in his *Hir Niaz Ranjha*.⁴¹ Mir argues that ‘such repetition registers the traces of orality embedded in these texts, and their multiple modes of transmission and reception’.⁴² Anand, too, draws on this Punjabi tradition and the repetitive refrain in his stories point to the embedded orality within a literary text. Consider the following:

The man headed towards the place where the juggler still played on the flute to the dancing cobra. ‘Listen to that music child,’ he pleaded. But the child shut his fingers and shouted his double-pitched strain: ‘*I want my mother, I want my father!*’ The man took

³⁹ Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punja*, p. 94.

⁴⁰ Ali Khawish, *Hir-Ranjha* (Lahore: Pundit Labo Ram and Sons TajranKutab, n.d.[1933]), p. 2.

⁴¹ Fassi Niaz Ahmad, *Hir Niaz Ranjha* (Niaz’s HirRanjha) (Lahore: Munshi Aziz al-Din wa Najm al-Din, n.d. [c.1914]).

⁴² Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*, p. 95.

him near the balloons thinking the bright colours of the balls would distract the child's attention and quieten him. 'Would you like a rainbow-coloured balloon?' he persuasively asked. 'The child turned his eyes from the flying balloons and just sobbed: *'I want my mother, I want my father.'*⁴³ (emphasis mine)

Thus, through drawing on the vernacular narrative tradition of fusing oral refrain with a textual framework, Anand imitates pre-colonial poets such as Fassi Niaz Ahmad and constructs his stories in the form of a neo-folktale. He frequently uses this device in his other stories.

The 'Five Short Fables', published in 1959 in the collection *The Power of Darkness and Other Stories*, is in itself unique and experimental in style as well as form. Anand constructs five different stories or fables and joins them together to construct a short story titled 'Five Short Fables'. The themes of all the fables are different; the only common thread running through all the fables is the use of animal characters or pastoral motifs to represent human dilemma. The animal tales are the ancient oral tales of the world. The tales recorded in *Panchatantra* or Aesop's tales often use animals to reflect on human issues, but by and large these tales are moral and instructive. In contrast, Anand uses the figure of an animal or a natural object such as a leaf as a device to deal with contemporary issues and address modern psychology. In the prefaces to his collection of oral tales and in many of his letters, he reiterates that he sought to create a new kind of "fable", 'which extends the old Indian story into a new age, without the moral lesson of the Indian story'.⁴⁴ R. K. Narayan, as we will discuss in the third chapter does similar formalistic intervention by introducing Kannada folktale form to the English prose. But Narayan limits himself to the themes popular in the

⁴³Mulk Raj Anand, 'The Lost Child', p. 41.

⁴⁴ Mulk Raj Anand, 'Preface to Selected Stories', in M.K.Naik, ed., *Selected Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 10.

Kannada folklore. Though formalistically it is innovative, thematically many of his short stories written in oral narrative style hark back on the popular moral tales that establishes the ongoing normative structures of the society. Anand radically shifts the subject of his short stories by bringing in contemporary issues. Such experimentation constructs a new form of short story that is stylistically much closer to oral narratives but deals with the then-contemporary issues of migration and women's rights. To understand this, I will now examine three fables of the short story entitled 'Five Short Fables'.

In the fable 'Leaf in a storm' from the 'Five Short Fables', Anand allegorically constructs his life narrative. In the story or fable, he sketches his journey from Punjab to England and again back to Punjab. Anand, as I mentioned earlier, had a complex life, both at a personal and political level. He had a very difficult relationship with his father. A nationalist by his upbringing, he was immensely affected by the Jallainwala incident of 1919, and in 1924 while protesting against the colonial government; he had even gone to jail. In the midst of all this, his relation with Yasmin created further complications.⁴⁵ He was almost forced by his mother to leave Punjab and travel to London for higher education. Saros Cowassjee rightly concludes: 'On September 1925, at the age of twenty, Anand sailed for England, not in the disinterested search for knowledge or to create awareness in the British public towards India's plight, but to escape his father' as well as further imprisonment. He arrived in England in 1925 and then returned back to India in 1946. Anand embeds travel metaphorically in the fable. He uses the analogy of a leaf to show his departure:

Once upon a time, there was a leaf, on the branch of a tree, *a little leaf tender like a Parrot's bosom*. (emphasis mine)

⁴⁵ Anand was in love with Yasmin, but sadly she was married to someone else and was later murdered.

There were other leaves which were piling with age and ready to drop off, on the brink of death. But *the little leaf that was tender like the parrot's bosom* was neither too small nor too big—it was young like the dawn. The lines on its palm were forming as though its fate was being set.

One day there came a breeze, which was not the breeze of Punjab. No one knew where it came from, the sky like a windstorm. It shook the whole tree. And it left *the little leaf, which was like the Parrot's bosom*, torn, so that the lines on its palm began to change. And suddenly, it began to sway, and sing a song, which was not the song of the land of the five rivers.

[...] And one day it uprooted the tree. And catching *the little leaf, which was tender like a Parrot's bosom*, in its mouth, the breeze blew away...Swaying gently, sad and alone, the leaf fell on an earth, where the Sun did not shine.

Long did the leaf languish in exile, thinking that just as the leaf from Bodhi tree had taken its root in Lanka, so it had flown across the Seas. But it did not know that the leaf which had flown to Lanka had a root attached to it, while its own roots lay drying in the land of the five rivers.⁴⁶

Anand again falls back on the device of repetition, while threading the image of the leaf with the phrase 'tender as a Parrot's bosom' to suggest his sense of exposure and vulnerability. The extended imagery of the tree and the leaf, going back to classical pastoral verse, English Romantic poetry such as Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' or the *Panchatantra*, are replete with literary overtones. But the analogy accretes particular intensities of meaning in the context of the agricultural economy of the Punjab, and the

⁴⁶Mulk Raj Anand, 'Five Short Fables', in M. K. Naik ed., *Selected Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 78.

exodus of its hundreds of thousands of young men through the late nineteenth century and the two world wars. Interestingly, many of the young sepoys serving in the trenches of the First World War would use very similar imagery to articulate their sense of disorientation and panic, as in the following letter: 'The condition of affairs in the war is like leaves falling off a tree, and no empty space remains on the ground'.⁴⁷ Anand himself would vividly recreate the lives of these men in *Across the Black Waters* (1940) but here the image is used to convey the pain of migration. There is an indication of his strong rootedness in local sights and sounds, in the indigenous fund of imagery and metaphor as he tries to evoke both the tenacity of the leaf and the pain of separation. The process of imagistic elaboration - 'so that the lines on its palm began to change' - is possibly a reference both to the political turmoil in the country and personal upheaval. But underpinning the extended metaphor is a poignant lyricism, evoked through the reference to a 'song' which paradoxically is not the song of five rivers - bearing testimony to his process of transculturation and introduction to a more cosmopolitan modernity. He subtly refers to his stay in England and conveys his initial sense of desolation and homesickness through the leaf which is pale with cold and shivering, but later came back and discovered a rock where it rested and finally came to terms with life. The reference to the Bodhi tree and Sri Lanka shows his unerring alertness to local mythology, lending a certain religious gravity to the lyrical image. Anand ends the tale with a suggestion, displaying the agonies of migration:

⁴⁷ Amar Singh Rawat (Garhwal Rifles) from Kitchener's Indian Hospital to Dayaram Jhapaliyal in Garhwal, 1 April, 1915, quoted in David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' letters, 1914-1918* (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 91.

They say that there are magic trees which spread their roots from the sky downwards to the soil. The uprooted leaf seems to feel that even drifting leaf might, one day become a tree with real roots. For it is necessary to have roots but not to get rooted in barren fields.⁴⁸

The fable ends with the suggestion that it is necessary to have ‘roots’, but not to get rooted in barren lands. The whole narrative portrays the writer’s sense of loss. There is also a folkloric dimension to the vocabulary: phrases such as ‘They say’ are a stock feature in fables, particularly of the Kangra region where Anand spent a long time. Folktales usually have a typical opening and ending; such a device, as A.K. Ramanujan argues, takes the reader into a distinct space.⁴⁹ Through such features, Susan Wadley argues, the receiver is told that ‘the performative reality has ended and that “natural” reality is once again dominant’.⁵⁰ Narayan as we will see and Anand both falls back on this device to construct a neo-folk tale, but while the master story-teller limits himself by repeating moral message, Anand knits it to the contemporary historical experience of travel and migration.

From the early days of the East India Company, a number of Indians travelled, migrated or settled in Britain.⁵¹ Many of them wrote travelogues to share their experiences. The first travel narrative to appear in English was Dean Mohammad’s *The Travels of Dean Mohammet* (1794).⁵² However, the earlier narrative of the nineteenth century glorified European modernity, often with a sense of awe and wonder. In many of these texts there is “an imposed

⁴⁸Mulk Raj Anand, ‘Five Short Fables’, in M.K.Naik, ed., *Selected Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 79.

⁴⁹A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Telling Tales’, in Vinay Dharwasker, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; 2004), pp. 448-62 (p. 461).

⁵⁰Susan Wadley, ‘*The Kathā of Śakaṭ: Two Tellings*’, in Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan ed., *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (London; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 195-232 (p. 226).

⁵¹Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

⁵²Please see Michael H. Fisher, *The First Indian Author in English. Dean Mahomed (1759-1851) in India, Ireland, and England* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

imperial framework of the travel”.⁵³ On the other hand, the travel narratives of the nationalists in the early twentieth century question and critique the unevenness of colonial modernity and pose a counterpoint to the glorified versions of the imperial center. Moreover, Javed Majeed, in his *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity* (2007), argues that the travel experiences of Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal show a departure from their predecessors as they ‘form a counter-discourse to colonial ethnology’s fixing of the “native”’.⁵⁴ Gandhi particularly breaks the traditional sophisticated journey by travelling through third class.⁵⁵ Anand, through his travel narrative, similarly counters the exhilaration of many tales of travels to the imperial centre, particularly by upper-class Indians.

In the ‘Leaf in a Storm’, Anand presents his own experiences, but in the other fables of the ‘Five Short Fables’, he returns to the women-centric themes. The narrative is woven around a female character and questions the dominant patrifocal norms. As in other parts of South Asia, in Punjab too, one sees the segregation between the genders. Such confinement results in a separate oral culture that illustrates the women’s world. Though the tales are recounted both by male and female, there is a difference in the context as well as the content. The tales by men tend to draw on the political and the historical issues, such as war or caste politics, whereas women’s tales deal with the issues of the inner household.

Anand, too, draws on this tradition; however, the author employs animal to protest against the normative system. Animal characters populate the folkloric world of Punjab.⁵⁶ Many of these songs, stories, proverbs and sayings are woven around women and so Anand brings she-dove or peahen at the center of the narrative to produce a women-centric tale. Like Raja

⁵³ Javed Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru, and Iqbal* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 65.

⁵⁴ Javed Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru, and Iqbal*, p.80.

⁵⁵ Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 225.

⁵⁶ Please see, Rita Brara, ‘Punjabi Inscriptions of Kinship and Gender: Sayings and Songs’ in Roma Chatterjee ed., *Veena Das and Scenes of Inheritance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), pp. 236-57 (p. 238).

Rao who introduced a grandmother to narrate the suffering of a village, Anand narrates some of these stories from a woman's point of view. While Rao has a nationalist agenda in constructing the grandmother as a narrator, Anand's experiment is purely literary. In the fable 'The Dove and the Crow', Anand draws on the rivalry between the crow and the she-dove. The she-dove symbolises the motherly affection and a rebellious attitude. At the same time, the crow represents villainy:

Gliding softly through the clouds like a sunray on a grey morning, the dove descended towards her nest in the banyan tree. In her beak were tightly held two grains gathered from a nearby field, and in her eyes was a liquid light, almost like a squint, from the concentration of her desire to get home for her eggs.

The concentration of the light in the dove's eyes nearly tore the air, as she quickly wheeled and made an effort to dive the pit: for there was the sign, the sure sign, of the crow's approach towards her nest. And this crow was the sworn enemy of her eggs, the vandal, the destroyer, who had twice before killed her young ones just before they had been born.

[...] She fluttered and cooed. The crow caw-cawed and was heard to hop away. Collecting herself together, she peered into the pit below her and with the concentration of instinct saw her nest. The two eggs she had been hatching lay, grey-white. Perhaps, they were safe. She had come in time.

[...] Th crow cawed defiantly. The crow caw-cawed, even as he heard the dove coo.
[sic]

[...] She again cooed shrilly.⁵⁷

Kirin Narayan argues that the folktales in Kangra are about relationships.⁵⁸ Drawing on her experiences with the story-teller Urmilaji; she claims that the oral tales in this region are usually about “love”. “Stories”, she goes on to state, ‘were ultimately about human ties, dramatizing cultural wisdom about how people live out their lives in relation with each other’.⁵⁹ In the Kannada region as I will demonstrate in the third chapter, it is not only relationship but also the rivalry that dominates the narrative of the ordinary story-teller. In Punjab as Kirin Narayan wonderfully shows it is the different facets of a relationship that overrides the telling. In the story, we see a similar rendering of the mother-child relationship; Anand may also be drawing on relationship with his mother. Also, Anand falls back on the folk technique of repetition. The repetition of the contrasting sounds of ‘cooing’ and ‘caw cawing’ produces a contrast between the benevolence of the she-dove and the villainy of the crow. Sound constructs characters. The crow knows that he has lost, but still he tries to overpower the dove with the intention of destroying her nest. But the she-dove keeps on fighting, and at last the he-dove rises and makes a noise to gather a number of surrounding birds. The crow flies away with fear.

While defining the folk tale as a genre, Susan Wadley argues that the ‘folktales contain cultural wisdom to be passed on to further generations, while being continually responsive to the settings and times in which they are told’.⁶⁰ She goes on to add that even when the stories are not meant to teach, they ‘contain biting commentaries on social situations and incorporate

⁵⁷Mulk Raj Anand, ‘Five Short Fables’, pp. 66-69.

⁵⁸Kirin Narayan(in collaboration with Urmila Devi Sood), *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales*, p. 3.

⁵⁹Kirin Narayan, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales*, p. 3.

⁶⁰Susan Wadley, ‘Folktales’, Margaret A.Mills, Peter J.Claus and Sarah Diamond ed., *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge: London, 2003), p. 218-20 (p. 218).

and substantiate key cultural beliefs'.⁶¹ In the above story, Anand weaves a similar narrative structure. Though not typically moral, it contains cultural wisdom to be passed on to future generations. The struggle of the mother establishes the centrality of women in the whole narrative. Anand ends the tale in a typical folk tale style:

They say in the Punjab that the dove can resist the attack of the crow, her proverbial enemy, with cooing. For the cooing comes from the deep, deep love of the mother for its young ones, and the cawing of the crow, as well as its red-eyed anger, comes from the smoke and ashes of the hatred in his heart.⁶²

In the 'Dove' we see the exaltation of women—a display of both her power and affection. In other stories from the fable, one notices a similar representation of women. For instance, in the fable called 'Peacock', Anand confers a powerful critique of male vanity:

Deep from within the fields, come the cries of the peacock, calling to the peahens.

And there, beyond the grove over the well, a pair alights. But, contrary to the expectations aroused by the song of the male calling the female, it is peahen that is hot on the trail of the peacock.

Afraid that she may lose him if he flies off again, the female bird treads the earth meditatively like the Nayika, vigilant, with longing in her eyes.⁶³

The narrative constructs a love contest between the peacock and the peahen. Traditionally adorned for his dance, the peacock in North India is considered as a symbol of love. The cry

⁶¹ Susan Wadley, 'Folktale', p. 218.

⁶² Mulk Raj Anand, 'Five Short Fables', p. 69.

⁶³ Mulk Raj Anand, 'Five Short Fables', p. 76.

of the peacock is often used as a metaphor in the literary texts.⁶⁴ Anand, here, reverses the dance symbolism of the peacock; in contrast to the popular imagination, a peahen is in the quest of a peacock. The male bird wants to be with his spouse but displays vanity while courting her. He tantalises the bird by rushing forward and backward:

‘pondering for a moment on how he may tantalise the female, again the peacock rushes forward suddenly, then rests till the peahen has reached him, but again sidetracks her.’⁶⁵

Whenever the peahen comes to him saying, ‘I have found you’, he shrieks as if responding, ‘I don’t want you’. At last, he thumps his leg, and begins his dance; his refulgent body, now in full sway, holds her content. On the other hand, the peahen woos her lover with her affectionate glance, treading the earth meditatively like the ‘Nayika’, with longing in her eyes. But the Peacock torments her and keeps on playing with her. Anand again ends the tale in a typical oral narrative style, rebuking the peacock and his method of courtship:

‘Is it a ray of humility that turns his eyes now to his ugly feet? Or is it the self-torment as they say in our village in appeasement of his colossal male vanity?’⁶⁶

Folktales are often considered as an authorized outlet for transgressive desires and frustrations.⁶⁷ ‘As a collective symbolic form’, observes Kirin Narayan, ‘folklore’s function is to express the culturally inexpressible’.⁶⁸ Indeed, the oral tales and songs are used as masks (not always) to speak about sensitive or intimate subjects. In South Asia, women’s speech is restricted particularly in villages and so they use folkloric devices to express themselves. Conventionally, women in the villages share their intimate moments through tales and songs.

⁶⁴ Anita Desai, for instance, calls her first novel *Cry, the Peacock*. Anita Desai, *Cry, the Peacock* (London: Peter Owen, 1973).

⁶⁵ Anand, p. 77.

⁶⁶ Anand, p. 76.

⁶⁷ See Alan Dundes, *Parsing through Customs: Essays by a Freudian Folklorist* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

⁶⁸ Kirin Narayan, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales*, p. 214.

In a patriarchal world, they voice their protest indirectly through such stories. Anand draws on the women-centric tales to provide women with a space of their own. The structuring of the narrative in the style of an oral tale plays an equally important role in reminding us of the intrinsic bond between the village women and the semi-autonomous space these oral narratives provided them with. While Rao shows a similar intimate connection between oral tradition and women in villages, he limits himself by enforcing nationalist ideology. Though the experiment is in itself interesting, it ignores the private moments shared in these closed spaces. Anand was aware of these spaces much better than Rao and so while appropriating these tales for his writing, he keeps the privacy of these inner spaces intact. In the process, Anand creates a new text, very different from the traditional forms. He employs various devices used in oral tales such as repetition, particular rhetorical tics for opening and ending, use of animal characters to synthesise the modern fictional form with the pre-colonial narrative form. If in the 'Five Short Fables', Anand draws on the narrative strategy of the oral tales, in his other short stories, notably 'Lullaby', he employs oral songs. I will now examine the representation of women through songs in the short stories of Anand in order to understand his engagement with the women's songs.

Women, Song, and Narrative Fiction

In a small village in Maharashtra, an old village woman, Gangubai Ambore, sings a song of lament:

In the forest, in the woods, who is weeping listen?
Bori-bhabhali [jujube and acacia tree] are the 'women' who listen to and console Sita.
[sic]

In this *ovi*—a form of folk song—Gangubai is lamenting Sita's fate.⁶⁹ The song recreates the pain of Sita who, after her banishment, sits alone in the forest. The acacia and jujube trees join her in this hour of pain. Gangubai, who was banished by her loved ones after she had leprosy, compares herself to Sita. Once a devoted wife, a caring mother and a loving sister, Gangubai sits by herself in a temple expressing her suffering through her songs. Singing songs is now the very way of her existence and a way of forgetting her woes. Songs thus enact as a carrier of emotions, transforming and transcending the lyrics through immaculate voice.⁷⁰ In Anand's native state of Punjab, folk songs are very popular among women and often act as a tool against the dominant caste and gender hierarchies.⁷¹ Rita Brara has argued that, for the women of Punjab, 'to sing a song and even to listen to it, then, is to make it one's own, either as a rendition in the first person or indeed as its individual or collective reformulation'.⁷² Anand incorporates women-centric song to present a voice to a silenced peasant-woman. This section proposes to examine the employment of song in the short stories of Mulk Raj Anand in order to understand his representation of peasant women.

Anand, in his short story entitled 'Lullaby' first published in 1944 in the collection *Barber's Trade Union and Other Stories*, draws on women's lament. The story narrates the longing of a mother for her ailing son and also her lost lover. Phalini, a young mother, sits in front of a machine inside a jute mill caressing her son with her song. A trained folk singer, she keeps humming the lyrics of lullaby to her baby. The sound keeps on recreating past memories. In the end, the child dies and her wailing drowns in the deep desolate noise of the

⁶⁹Medha Kale, 'Interview of Gangubai Ambore', <https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/the-grindmill-songs-recording-a-national-treasure>. Ovi is the oldest form of women's song popular in the Maharashtra state of India. Women sing these songs during work or for pleasure.

⁷⁰Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (London: John Murray, 2009), p. 415. Amitav Ghosh, in *Sea of Poppies* (2009), draws on this emotion. He employs a Bhojpuri song sung by women to show the pain of separation. Deeti, while sitting on the Ibis which was soon to take her away from her homeland, sings 'kaisekate ab, birahakeratiyan' (how will it pass, the night of separation).

⁷² Rita Brara, 'Punjabi Inscriptions of Kinship and Gender: Sayings and Songs', p. 258.

machine. Anand, hence, presents a critique of mechanisation through maternal lament. In *Kanthapura* (1938), Rao introduces folk songs popular among women to integrate them into the nationalist politics. Rao brilliantly appropriates the song popular among peasant women to suit his narrative. However, his appropriation of women's song is limited to the nationalist agenda. Anand, though, uses folk songs to demonstrate woman's sense of agony.

'Lullaby', a lyrical short story, generates a drifting image of women's lament through sound:

'Sleep
Oh Sleep
My baby, sleep,
Oh, do not weep,
Sleep
Like a fairy...'

Would he ever get to sleep?

'Sleep
Oh, sleep
My baby, sleep...' ⁷³

Phalini, a peasant worker in a jute mill, is sitting beside a 'giant' machine, caressing her ailing son with the song of the lullaby. The flesh of the five-month-old baby is warm, and she could feel 'his little limbs on her thighs, a burning heat which was mixed with a sour smell'. So, the question: 'would he ever get to sleep'? The mother mourns through her song, and the repetition, 'Sleep, oh sleep, my baby, sleep', metaphorically suggests the sense of loss. The sound of the engine 'chuk-chulked' and the leather belt 'khupp-khupp' overlaps with the lullaby, constructing a fraught sonic space where life becomes the slave of the machine. As noted above, women in South Asia often comment on a political decision or voice their protest through singing songs. Santanu Das, in his essay 'The Singing Subaltern', clearly

⁷³Mulk Raj Anand, 'Lullaby', *Selected Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977), p. 43.

shows how the lament of the non-literate village women, whose fathers, sons or husbands had gone to war, record their critique of war through song.⁷⁴ He also argues that ‘such accounts point to a tantalising area of subaltern female protest against the war recruitment’.⁷⁵ Anand, in his ‘Lullaby’, presents a similar subaltern peasant protest against industrialisation and its aftermath. The song echoes with the song of Rao’s women in *Kanthapura*. Though it lacks the sharpness of women’s voice noticeable in the songs sung in Rao’s novels.

The song of Phalini records the anxiety of a mother. The rolling jute machine, juxtaposed with the crying of the baby, constructs the uncanny voice of the subaltern, drowned within the complexities of machine life. Phalini struggles to make her baby fall asleep, but it keeps on crying, crying with pain. The noise of the jute mill makes him disconsolate, but the poor mother has to work on the machine to feed him in the night. She, therefore, has to go on feeding the gaping mouth of the machine. ‘Ooon...oon...oon’ Suraj Mukhi, her son, cries and Phalini continues singing, ‘Sleep Oh, Sleep, My baby, Sleep’. She is a trained folk singer for she recalls a work folk-song:

‘Roller,
Roll,
Spread Jute,
Open mouth,
Rise jute,

⁷⁴Santanu Das, ‘The Singing Subaltern’, *Parallax*, vol.17, no.3 (2011), 4-18 (p. 9).

⁷⁵Santanu Das, ‘The Singing Subaltern’, p. 10.

My husband, and his two brothers

All have gone to laam.

Hearing the news of the war

Leaves of tress got burnt

[...]

Without you I feel lonely here.

Come and take me away to Basra.

I will spin the wheel the whole night.

[...]

War destroys towns and ports, it destroys huts

I shed tears, come and speak to me.⁷⁵

Fall seeds,
Work into cloth.’⁷⁶

Anand juxtaposes the song of the mother, ‘Lullaby’, with a work song to produce a sense of suffering. Phalini compares her lullaby with her work song and finds she is not singing well. Her voice is fragmented and is producing noise rather than the melody. However, unlike the machine-like rhythm, as in ‘roll, spread jute’, the lullaby generates powerful imagery of agony and frustration. Intriguingly, the lament of Phalini is not only for her ailing son, but also for her lost lover. Her beloved ‘wild, waspish boy with large brown eyes’ had enticed her into a relationship beyond social norms. She was already married, but still she fell in love another man. Suraj Mukhi was his son, and his eyes were ‘like his’. The song then transcends into a song of separation, since her lover is now gone. Slyly drifting through the dry lips of Phalini, the song reconstructs the image of her lost lover:

Phalini saw him as she had seen him in a dream one day, standing by her side, smiling by her breast. But she had stretched her arms towards him, she had suddenly wakened and found herself groping in the dark towards Kirodhar, who had thought she wanted him and had taken her. He must be somewhere in the far-off hills, doing what?...Wandering perhaps, happy and free, while she was caged here with her child.⁷⁷

Phalini is lamenting the loss of her lover through her song. She recollects his smell, sight, and touch through the lullaby sung to his son. The singing of the song thus recreates the memory. She repeats the words ‘sleep, o, sleep’ not only to make her child sleep, but also to recall her lover again and again. While analysing Helen Myers’s collection of folk songs, Vijay Mishra has argued that the songs of the indentured women are marked by songs about the departure of the bride, wedding and birth songs and the devotional songs often based on

⁷⁶Mulk Raj Anand, ‘Lullaby’, p. 45.

⁷⁷ Anand, ‘Lullaby’, p. 47.

the Tulsidas *Ramayana*.⁷⁸ But what he finds striking in the collection is the wide repertoire of lament songs within the plantation community. Women, particularly, sing songs of separation.⁷⁹ Here also, the song acts as a tool for memorial reconstruction. The child, however, dies: ‘The effigy lay still. Dead’, and the wailing of Phalini gets drowned by the deep, desolate sound of the machines: ‘The engine chuk-chuked; the leather belt khupp-khupped; the bolts jig-jigged; the plugs tik-tikked; the whole floor shook like the hard wooden seat of a railway train...’.

In her seminal essay, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Gayatri Chakravorty examines the passionate lament of the Bhuvaneshawri Devi, and poses a controversial but sincere question: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ She pronounces that ‘the female as a subaltern cannot be heard or read’.⁸⁰ The drowning out of the sound of Phalini echoes the suicide of the Bhubneshawri, where her menstruating voice got deflected by her prejudiced family. Her voice, though loud, got lost. Phalini’s lament, too, is lost, unheard, but still she speaks. Rajeswari Sunder rajan, in her analysis of the case, rightly argues that ‘[Bhuvaneshawri] serves as the figural example of the subaltern who cannot-but, in fact does speak’.⁸¹ She further argues that the declaration of the true cause of death through ‘a coded message via her body’, only to remove charges of illicit pregnancy, transforms Bhuvaneshwari into a gendered subaltern, who is bound to submit to the violence of the social system that essentially demands the evidence of female

⁷⁸ Helen Myers, *Music of Hindu Trinidad: Songs from the Indian Diaspora* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

⁷⁹ Blow eastern breeze, pain come up:
Oh! Pain comes up, Oh! Pain comes up!
Blow eastern breeze, pain comes up oh!
In what city to search for my husband.

⁸⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg ed., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313 (p. 306).

⁸¹ Rajeswari Sunder rajan, ‘Speaking of (Not) Hearing: Death and the Subaltern’, in Rosalind Morris, ed., *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 117-138 (p. 112).

chastity.⁸² Like, Bhubneshawri, Phalini is the figural example of the ‘gendered subaltern’ who speaks loudly through her songs, but submits to the violence of the social system.

The various strands we have been discussing so far – the pain of separation, subaltern speech, folk song and animal fable – all powerfully come together in the story ‘A Parrot in the Cage’ that Mulk Raj Anand wrote quite late in his career. Published in 1953, the story shifts the themes mentioned above into a new historical context: the trauma of Partition. The partition of British India remains one of the most traumatic and disruptive events of the twentieth century, and is a growing field of enquiry.⁸³ The division of the nation on communal lines ushered in collective violence, dislocation, and the displacement of millions of refugees across North and North-West India. Yet this catastrophic event, involving millions of lives, is transmuted by Anand into a deeply intimate, lyrical, if wholly heart-breaking, story. The short story entitled ‘A Parrot in a Cage’, published in 1953 in the collection *Reflections on the Golden Bed and Other Stories*, shows an amalgamation of the folk tale devices that we have been discussing. The narrative comprises the tale of an old peasant woman, Rukmini. Once again, the author falls back on the women-centric tale to give voice to a muted subaltern, portraying the miseries of the partition through the eyes of an old peasant woman.⁸⁴ However, here, too, the plot is devised through an animal—a parrot in a cage. In the ‘Lost Child’, the child’s separation from mother was central to the narrative. In ‘A Parrot in a Cage’, the land and its memories transmute into the image of the mother, and the separation from the home becomes central to the narrative. Intriguingly, in many stories

⁸²Rajeswari Sunder rajan, ‘Speaking of (Not) Hearing: Death and the Subaltern’, p. 125.

⁸³ See Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸⁴ Paradoxically, few had anticipated that such a bloodbath and violence would accompany the division of territory.

that I have so far examined, memory and longing are pivotal to the plot. Beginning with 'Lost Child', the sense of loss creates multiple complexities in the fiction of Anand and remains critical to the literary consciousness of the author.

In the 'Parrot in a Cage', Rukmini, a worker, is displaced after the partition riots. Sitting under a banyan tree, she ruminates by herself. Her only companion is her parrot in the cage. The dialogue between the bird and the woman provides one of the most powerful accounts of the displacement:

'Rukamanai, Rukamanai!', the parrot in the cage called in the way Rukmini's friends used to call her when they entered the alley way of Kacha Chabuk Swaran in Lahore.

[...] She was peering through the little clouds of dust raised by the passing motors and tongas and yekkas in the direction from which she had been told by the roasted gram seller, the Dipty Collator was to come and she remained heedless to the Parrot's cry.

Rukminai! Rukminai! The Parrot called shrilly and went on repeating the cry with sure mocking bird's instinct that if he kept on calling her she would answer.

'Ni tun Kithehain?' Where are you?'

'Son, I don't know where I am...' she said listlessly, in the effort to keep the parrot quiet by assuring him she was taking notice of him.⁸⁵

Rukmini waits under the banyan tree for the 'Dipty Collator' to come. She somehow has managed to escape the violence filled with 'choking smoke' and has come to Amritsar in order to find a new life. The parrot in a cage accompanies her. When called, 'Rukamanai, Rukamanai!' she remains heedless and silent. Earlier the sound used to fill her with joy as it

⁸⁵ Mulk Raj Anand, 'The Parrot in a Cage', in M.K.Naik ed. *Selected Short Stories of Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 107.

gave the signal of her friends, but now the sound has no meaning. Everything is lost in ‘blazing light’, and the ‘crackling of burning house beams’. The parrot later asks her a familiar question, ‘Ni tun Kithe hain’ (Where are you?). The bird goes on repeating it, and finally the old woman responds, ‘Son, I don’t know where I am...’. Simple, basic and devastatingly powerful, it evokes the homelessness and dereliction of the refugee. The question also reminds her of how her past days were filled with joy; at the same time, it says that things are now lost. The parrot calls again:

‘*Ni tun kithe hai? Ni tun Ki karnihai?*’ (Where are you? What are you doing here?) the Parrot’s monologue continued. So did her self-communing, aroused by the anonymous, meaningless repetitive calls: ‘Nowhere, Son, nothing, nothing...’⁸⁶

In the constant repetition of the two phrases (*‘Ni tun kithe hai? Ni tun Ki karnihai?’*), Anand draws on women’s folk laments. The refrain, ‘Ni tun’ draws the listener into an intricate sonic structure, combining the anaphora (Ni tunkithehai; Ni tunkiKarnihai) with a pattern of repetition centred on the old woman. In the centre of the mayhem is the parrot, but in a cage, lamenting the loss of its master; what Rukmini can offer in response is only a series of negatives, the word ‘nothing’ having all the sorrow and poignancy of its famous usage in *King Lear*. While discussing South Asian songs during the First World War, Santanu Das expands the genre of life-writing and of testimony by including laments by the women of Punjab and colonial POWs in a German prison-camp, and stresses on the ‘compulsive need to tell’ on part of each group.⁸⁷ Examining recordings of Punjabi songs from German archives in the war years, he notes in particular the case of a sepoy POW and how, ‘traumatised by his experience and perhaps haunted by the knowledge of his approaching death, Jasbahadur turns

⁸⁶ Mulk Raj Anand, ‘Parrot in a Cage’, p. 113.

⁸⁷ Santanu Das, ‘Reframing life/war ‘writing’: Objects, Letters and Songs of Indian Soldiers, 1914-1918’, *Textual Practice*, 49 (2015), 1265-1287 (p. 1282).

an ethnographical experiment into one of the most haunting examples of life narrative'.⁸⁸ Vijay Mishra, similarly, records the lament of the indentured woman and concludes that 'the remembrance of songs was symptomatic of a social disjunction and displacement which left permanent scars'.⁸⁹ Here, the song of the parrot gives voice to the life narrative of a refugee woman, displaced from Lahore to Amritsar. The repetition of phrases, thus, becomes an act of recreating the past; an act of telling tales of survival.

While examining women-centric songs, Narayan Rao pertinently asks a question, 'Why do women sing songs?'⁹⁰ He tries to present an answer through Edwin Ardener's theory of muted group.⁹¹ However, Ardener later clarifies that the muted groups are not essentially "silenced" groups; they *do* express themselves but through an alternative speech discourse. The women and so-called 'lower-castes' in India fall into the category of the muted group or subaltern. Doubly oppressed, the 'lower-caste' women singers reject the suppression not in a confrontational but in a subtle and subversive manner through their songs. Phalini and Rukamini, as low-caste peasant women, voice their protest against the social norms and political decisions through lamentation. Song thus transforms into a life narrative. Phalini and Rukmini are feisty women struggling alone against the odds and are unapologetic in their attitude towards life. Such powerful representation of the female characters elevates the craft of Anand and reaches back to the deep influence of his mother, Ishwar Kaur, and the women-centric tales she used to tell the author when he was a child.

⁸⁸Santanu Das, 'Reframing life/war 'writing': Objects, Letters and Songs of Indian Soldiers, 1914-1918', p. 1282.

⁸⁹Vijay Mishra, 'Plantation Diaspora *Testimonios* and the Enigma of the Black Waters', p. 566.

⁹⁰Velcheru Narayana Rao, 'A Rāmāyaṇa of Their Own: Women's Oral Tradition in Telugu', in Paula Richman, *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 114-136 (p. 133).

⁹¹Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women" and "The Problem Revisited", both in *Perceiving Women*, ed., Shirley Ardener (London: Dent, 1975), pp. 1-17 and pp. 19-27, respectively.

Chapter Three

“Telling Tales”: Folk Tale Technique in the Fiction of R. K. Narayan

In the collection *Gods, Demons and Others* (1965), R. K. Narayan makes a confession about his deep connection with the oral narratives and how after listening to the ‘original course of narrative’, he has allowed them to ‘make their impact’ on his mind, and has later rewritten them in his own terms.¹ In many of his short stories and the novel *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), Narayan follows a similar method. He transforms the ancient tales and rewrites the new version according to his interpretation. It is this construction of a new narrative that this chapter intends to examine. Here, I examine the oral-fictional world of Narayan, with reference to *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and some stories, and how such a mode of narration is used to yield the psychological delicacy for which these works are justly celebrated. As already stated in Chapter 2, a fellow writer, Mulk Raj Anand in the preface to his collection of Punjabi folk tales, observes: ‘At any rate, I must confess that although I have taken in much new psychology into my own writing of the short-story, I have always tried to approximate to the technique of the folk tale’.² However it would be in the works of R. K. Narayan that Anand’s observations would bear its richest fruit. Like Anand, Narayan also approximates to the technique of the folk tale. Hence, I investigate this approximation and how it modifies the form of the short-story with reference to the stories from *An Astrologer’s Day* (1947). If in the short stories, Narayan draws on the folk tales to create his distinct style, in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), he transforms an epic narrative into a domestic tale. The vast majority of critics consider the story to be a mythical conflict between the two

¹ R.K. Narayan, *Gods, Demons and Others* (London: Heinemann, 1965), p. 10.

² Mulk Raj Anand, *Indian Fairy Tales* (Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1946), p. 1.

individuals—Vasu and Nataraj.³ The novel, I argue instead, can equally be understood as a folkloric rendering of modern India. I examine the engagement of the novel with the South Indian oral stories and the unpredictable relationship between myth, folktale, and literary texts, with particular attention to the representation of Rangi, a *devadasi* - a class of women who, during the mid-twentieth century, faced enormous resistance from the reformists. Narayan embeds his novel into the *devadasi* politics of the period. While doing so, as I argue, he translates an epic story into a domestic tale told in the 'inner household'. The elaborate drama around the temple elephant in the novel will also be a focus of attention, closely connected to Narayan's deployment of the folkloric form. But before analysing Narayan's engagement with the South Indian folktale, it is important to understand his immersion into the world of orality.

The Talkative Man and his World⁴

Born in Madras in 1906, Rashipuram Krishnaswamy Narayan was the third child of his parents and spent his early childhood with his maternal grandmother, popularly called Ammani. As with Raja Rao, Narayan's initial engagement with the folk tales and songs was through his grandmother. Ammani, as the child's early teacher, sought to provide his early education, and along with the hated arithmetic, she acquainted Narayan with the Hindu mythology, folk tales, songs and legends, and Carnatic music.⁵ In *The Grandmother's Tale* (1993), Narayan recounts a favourite folk song about a drunkard and his child learnt from

³ Please see Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann Ltd., 1972), p. 141-146 and Edwin Gerow 'The Quintessential Narayan', *Literature East & West*, X (1966), 1-18.

⁴ I call Narayan 'talkative man' as I argue that in many of his short stories he transforms into a teller called 'talkative Man'.

⁵ Susan Ram and N. Ram, *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, p. 20.

Ammani.⁶ Seated on her swing, Ammani would draw upon the rich folk tradition of Tamil Nadu as well as narrate tales from her own past, imbibing in her little grandson the love of story-telling.⁷ Towards the end of his life, in a conversation, Narayan appreciatively recalled his tremendous debts to Ammani, describing her as ‘the most abiding influence’ in his childhood and as an ‘extraordinary character- absolutely principled’, deserving a book in her own right.⁸

We have glimpses of his grandmother through accounts provided in *My Days* and *The Grandmother’s Tale* (1993). We also see the literary rendering of Ammani in Narayan’s first novel *Swami and his Friends* (1935). Though Swami’s grandmother is aged and frail, she shares Ammani’s compassion and skill in story-telling. The grandmother in the novel often retells the tale of her husband’s valour and how he made the police force ‘tremble before him, and the fiercest dacoits of the place flee’.⁹ After the evening meal, she used to narrate the story of Harishchandra who, true to his words, lost his throne, wife and child and then got them back in the end: there was often a fabular quality to the tales.

Apart from his grandmother, and also his mother, the other substantial influence on Narayan was his maternal uncle, T. N. Sechaclam. His uncle, like Narayan’s grandmother, was a multi-faceted personality and pursued a variety of interests. In his early years, he became an amateur photographer, developing his pictures in his darkened room in the family house. He was equally at home with Tamil and English and was also familiar with Sanskrit. In 1928, he launched a weekly Tamil journal called *Kala Nilayam* (Abode of culture). Though there was no direct communication between the two, he nevertheless introduced Narayan to classical and Tamil poetry. For biographer Susan Ram, Sechaclam seemed to

⁶ R.K. Narayan, *The Grandmother’s Tale* (London: Heinemann, 1993), p. 4-5.

⁷ Susan Ram and N.Ram, *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, p. 20.

⁸ Susan Ram and N.Ram, *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, p. 20.

⁹ Please see R.K. Narayan, *Swami and Friends* (London: Heinemann, 1944).

have been a quiet but “influential presence” in Narayan’s childhood.¹⁰ In his autobiography, Narayan recounts that his uncle had advised him on his deathbed that he should study Kamban’s *Ramayana*.¹¹

Narayan arrived in Mysore in 1922 and attended the Maharaja’s Collegiate High School, where his father was the headmaster. He subsequently moved on to the Maharaja’s College, which was a part of the recently founded University of Mysore. English history and literary tradition dominated the education that Narayan received in this period. He was introduced to the canon of English literature, from Scott and Dickens to romance writers such as Henry Wood and Marie Corelli, and contemporary literary figures such as H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Hardy. Furthermore, the young Narayan, being the son of the school headmaster, had access to many of the leading English journals, including *The Spectator*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Strand*, *The London Mercury* and *The Bookman*. At home, his father was a broad-minded intellectual who, after receiving a modern education in Madras, had cut himself off from his ancestral family and given up any claim to the property. Narayan, in a conversation in 1995, recalled:

My father was very different from his original family. They had the impression that he had become very westernized, and after his marriage, they disapproved of my mother’s club-going, ‘modern ways’.¹²

Raised in such a hybrid culture where Kannada and Tamil, Sanskrit and English existed together in a cosmopolitan milieu, Narayan was exposed to the various literary traditions that coexisted in colonial India. Though raised in a Tamil Brahmin family, Narayan was quick to shed off the orthodox tradition; he consequently adapted to the new world brought in by the

¹⁰ Susan Ram and N. Ram, *R. K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, p. 27.

¹¹ R.K. Narayan, *My Days: A Memoir* (New York: Viking, 1974), p. 102.

¹² Susan Ram and N. Ram, *R.K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*, p. 11.

colonial modernity. Unlike Raja Rao who forcefully asserted his Brahmin identity through his fictional work, Narayan remained detached. At times, as we will see he voiced his protest against supersiding nationalist/reformist voices. He had even joined an anti-brahmin Journal named *Justice* during his early days and had refused to concede to the horoscopic problems that rose during his marriage. Narayan in sharp contrast to Rao was essentially part of a multicultural cosmopolitan world.

While depicting his own his adolescence, A.K. Ramanujan, a fellow critic and writer, notes that there were three literary corners in his house—Sanskrit, Tamil, and Kannada. He further says that ‘the stories we heard downstairs were in Tamil; they were oral, told by a grandmother, an aunt or cook’, adding, ‘our *literate* (my emphasis) father never told us stories, though he knew them; he talked about astronomy, astrology, the Sanskrit *Bhagvad Gita*, Chaucer and Shakespeare’.¹³ R. K. Narayan, who spent his adolescence in a similar multi-lingual, multi-social environment, was exposed to various literary and oral traditions. He also experienced three literary corners in his house. R. K. Laxman, Narayan's younger brother, also wrote vividly about the trilingualism of the Narayans.¹⁴ However, when Narayan chose to write in his mid-twenties, he chose English as the medium of expression. Years later, in a 1978 radio talk, he said that he wrote in English rather than Tamil or Kannada out of ‘personal preference’; he further added that, when he began his writing career, ‘no one questioned it, language had not become a sensitive issue, people spoke and wrote any language suited to their needs or circumstances’.¹⁵

¹³ A. K. Ramanujan, ‘Telling Tales’, in Vinay Dharwadker, ed., *The Collected Essays of R.K. Narayan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 448-462 (p. 449).

¹⁴ See R. K. Laxman, ‘The Tunnel of Time’, in *Collected Writings* (Delhi: Penguin, 2000), p. 264.

¹⁵ R. K. Narayan, ‘What Kind of Literature Do our Students Need’, Talk on All India Radio, Bangalore, broadcast on 16 June, 1978.

For Narayan, too, the publication of his novels proved to be a difficult task. He used to regularly submit his manuscript to the publication houses in Britain, but did not find a suitable publisher. Disappointed by regular rejections, he asked his friend Kittu who was at the time studying at Oxford University to find a publisher for him. It was due to the efforts of Kittu Purna that the manuscript landed at the desk of Graham Greene who led to the publication of Narayan's early novels. Commenting on the British publishers' understanding of an Indian novel, early in 1933 Narayan wrote scathingly satirical column "How to Write an Indian Novel". He writes:

First think of a good title (something like "Fires of Hate", "Death of love," "The Infatuated Raja", etc.) and add under it's the sub-title that it is a "Novel of Indian Life". ...After that you must cultivate the acquaintance of the following words (with their spellings): Hindu, Moslem, Brahmin, Crocodile, Bengal, Shikari, Dak Bungalow, Jungle, Great Mutiny, Sahib...Never fail to use the words "Holy" and "Sacred" as often as possible.¹⁶

In this ironic column, Narayan exposes the Orientalist tendencies of the publishers and reviewers of the time. Ranasinha, while comparing the novels of Aubrey Menon and Raja Rao, establishes a similar sense of disparity prevalent among the publishers and reviewers of the period. While Menon's novel on the witches, she argues, was widely acclaimed and positively reviewed, Rao's realistic novel received widespread criticism.¹⁷ Even after facing disapproval, authors like Rao, Narayan and Anand kept on writing in English and never changed their style. Rosemary George rightly points out 'despite the very few and brief published works that Narayan had to his credit before securing a publisher for *Swami and*

¹⁶ R. K. Narayan, "How to Write an Indian Novel", Punch, 1933.

¹⁷ See Ruvani Ranasinha, 'Rao's *Kanthapura* and Menon's *The Prevalence of Witches*', pp. 279-300.

Friends, he wrote his first novel in English with confidence'.¹⁸ However, the Second World War affected the circulation of Narayan's novels.¹⁹ To distribute cheap copies of his novels, he established Indian Thought publication in 1942 to increase his readership.

Whatever the language of expression may be, the influence of vernacular literary tradition, particularly the folktale, is seen in various novels and short stories of the writer. Narayan's association with Tamil and Kannada oral narratives continues throughout his literary career. However, it is only in the novels written after 1945 that we see a more significant engagement with the folklore.²⁰ Beginning with *Mr Sampath: The Printer of Malgudi* (1949) and culminating with *The Painter of Signs* (1977), the novels of Narayan's middle period represent his finest achievement and show links with Tamil and Kannada folklore.²¹

In 1964, Narayan published a collection of classical myths and folktales, *Gods, Demons and Others*, and in 1972 he published an abridged version of the Kamaban's *Ramayana* and also *Mahabharata*. In the introduction to *Ramayana*, Narayan analyses the image of Rama and Ravana. For him, *Ramayana* had 'lessons' in the presentation of motives, and it is only in the areas of power, including in family units, that he saw Ravana-the evil antagonist.²² In many of his writings, Narayan interprets, imagines or invents various mythic and folkloric traditions diversely and humorously, invoking the complex multilingual and multicultural identity of the urban folk culture within the context of a strict hierarchy of historical, cultural

¹⁸Rosemary Marangoly George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*, p. 59.

¹⁹See John Thieme, *R. K. Narayan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

²⁰ As history records, it was Kittu Purna who introduced the manuscript of *Swami and his Friends* to Graham Greene and Greene helped Narayan in publishing his four early novels.

²¹ The years 1939-1945 were tragic for the gifted writer as he lost his beloved wife, Rajam, in 1939. The end of 1945 saw Narayan fully emerged from the period of darkness. He, through tremendous internal effort, found an ordered world filled with "philosophic equipoise". The bereavement of the author, for some critics, only served to deepen his art.

²² R. K. Narayan, *Rāmāyaṇa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1977), p. xi.

and linguistic traditions.²³ His range is wide, and the author's creative ability sets out from folk to classical and in a considerable number of his works we see the look of an old storyteller.

While commenting on the longevity of the oral tales, a hair-blackener in *Vendor of Sweets* (1967) says:

"I know the story of the goddess," said Jagan
"Who doesn't?" replied the hair-blackener. "But still it is always good to hear it over and over again."²⁴

It is this retelling of the popular myth and tale that I will now examine. Before analysing Narayan's style of story-telling, it is important though to analyse various forms of oral story-telling in South India.

The Tales of Inner Household: *Akam*

A.K. Ramanujan, in his famous essay entitled 'Two Realms of Kannada folklore', classifies South Indian folktales, in particular Kannada folktales, into two categories –*akam* and *puram*.²⁵ Ramanujan borrows these terms from classical Tamil poetry. The Tamil poems that have survived thus far are divided into two general classes: *akam* or inside and *puram* or outside. The division is rather gendered. The *akam* illustrates the phases of love between man and woman; that is, 'their subject is life viewed from inside the family': their focus is on the domestic sphere.²⁶ The *puram* is more varied and wide-ranging, including many different kinds of poem: poems of war, of King's praise, of supplicant's requests, of mourning, of

²³ For instance, Narayan illustrates the Temple Procession, a popular folk culture, in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

²⁴ R.K. Narayan, *Vendor of Sweets* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 88.

²⁵ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada folklore', in p. 51.

²⁶ George Hart, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and their Sanskrit Counterpart* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 7.

ethics, all of which deal with ‘men’s interactions in society, outside the family’.²⁷ Ramanujan draws on these two literary terms to discuss the various methods of tale-telling in South India. I will now briefly discuss these two forms of oral narration and then go on to show their connection with Narayan’s short stories.

Ramanujan classifies *Puram* tale-telling as the stories told outside of the inner household. Men perform them orally in an outer setting. Either the amateur artists perform them for fun, or a trained professional narrates the tale for entertainment or spiritual teaching. The teller usually has a repertoire of secular and religious stories. The caste marks of the teller are of high importance. For instance, *Harikatha* performers usually have a vermillion or sandal paste marked on their forehead. The teller mostly belongs to a high caste and achieves a sacred status through his telling. The language of the performer is of high importance. The *puram* tale-telling is in a highly stylized language and uses formulaic prose, songs, exalted dialogues, costumes, assistants, instruments and props, like pictures and puppets. A performer sometimes combines Sanskrit, regional and Persian language during his performance. One example of the *Puram* tale-telling in Karnataka is *Harikatha*. Raja Rao, as discussed in the first chapter uses *puram* (*Harikatha*) tradition of telling tales in *Kanthapura*.²⁸ In the narration, a Brahman, pundit Jayaramachar narrates the tale of Brahma and sage Valmiki. He performs the telling by invoking gods and offering prayer to the divinity. He embellishes the performance through formulaic prose. The whole narrative is political and deals with the men’s interaction outside the family. Women are gathered, here, only as an audience. Hence, they are passive recipient of the tale.

The *akam* tales usually have no names and do not invoke divinity at the beginning or formally greet a public audience. Ramanujan claims that the style of an *akam* tale is swift,

²⁷ George Hart, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and their Sanskrit Counterpart*, p. 7.

²⁸ Rao, p. 17.

diction is suitable for the general understanding, and digression is limited. In a Kannada or Tamil household, a female member narrates the *akam* tale to the children; their audience is the family. Women are not passive listeners; rather they actively involve themselves in telling tales. It is further extended to women's ritual tales or *Vrata Katha*, which involves the whole family and sometimes also the neighbouring women.

Stuart Blackburn, while analysing Tamil *akam* tales, claims that the majority of Tamil tales speak out against wrongdoing, particularly physical cruelty and suffering.²⁹ 'Tamil tales are best understood through their moral dramas', Blackburn argues, 'not an implicit morality hidden in deep symbolism, but a message explicitly expressed in the pattern of crime and punishment that constitute the narrative'.³⁰ While primarily studying the tales of inner household, Blackburn, here, comments on the moral structure of the *akam* tales. The interpretation of Blackburn, however, is problematic as he seems to 'close the door on the narration's multidimensional potential when he asserts the prominence of morality over fantasy'.³¹ In a folk system, some tellers seem to use both, working together, and the capacity of the teller and listener to focus on multiple dimensions is evident in the local discussions which Blackburn occasionally quotes in his study of Tamil tales. Some tellers or audiences push a moral message; whereas others just enjoy the lighter side.

In *akam*, an ordinary teller such as grandmother begins the tale without any digression. Her narration is prompt; language is close to ordinary speech, 'heightened or lightened by the talent of granny'.³² Domestic issues related to women dominate the *akam* tale. In the tale, the childlessness or relationship with wife, husband, brother, sister, or a friend is an important

²⁹ Stuart Blackburn, *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from oral tradition* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2010), p. 19.

³⁰ Stuart Blackburn, *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from oral tradition*, p. 19.

³¹ Ruth Finnegan, 'Review of Stuart Blackburn, *Moral Fictions: Tamil Folktales from Oral tradition* in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Part 1, vol.66, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 117.

³² A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada folklore,' p. 45.

issue and the whole narrative is drawn from that perspective. Even when the tale is told from a male point of view, the household subjects dominate the narrative. In some of his shorter fiction, Narayan adopts the style, theme and form of the *akam* tales. I will now go on to examine some of Narayan's short stories and then go on to discuss the translation of myth into a folktale in his novel, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*.

The Short Stories as *Akam*

Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R. K. Narayan all drew on local legends to write short fiction.³³ As stated in Chapter 2, Anand was deeply influenced by the stories told by his mother. While portraying his technique for synthesising the short-story with the folktale, Anand narrates: 'While accepting the form of the folk tale, specifically in its fabulous character, I took in the individual and group psychology of the European Conte and tried to synthesise the two styles'.³⁴ He tried to make old Indian fables fit into modern tales for the 'new age' by stripping off its moral lesson, 'yet embodying its vitality and including the psychological understanding of the contemporary period'.³⁵ Narayan, by contrast, keeps the moral structure of the folk tales intact. I will analyse some of the stories of Narayan through the prism of Ramanujan's classification to understand the author's experiment with the form of the fiction through his 'rewriting' of certain *akam* tales.

Narayan composed short stories for *The Hindu*, on a weekly basis, starting in 1939. Later, he published a collection, *Malgudi Days*, in 1942. *An Astrologer's Day and other stories* was published in 1947 and *Lawley Road and Other Stories* in 1956. In some of his short stories, Narayan invents, following the tradition of *akam* tales, a stock character called 'the talkative

³³ Please see Disha Sharma, *Stories of R.K. Narayan: Themes and Techniques* (New Delhi: Satyam Publishing House, 2010), p. 27.

³⁴ Mulk Raj Anand, 'Preface to Selected Stories', in M.K.Naik, ed., *Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973), p. 10.

³⁵ Mulk Raj Anand, 'Preface to Selected Stories', in M.K.Naik, ed., *Mulk Raj Anand*, p. 10.

man'. Like the figure of the grandmother, he is an ordinary teller who appreciates telling tales to the chosen audience. He does not formally welcome his audience; neither does he offer an invocation to God. There are no melodies or props added to assist the teller. There is hardly any reference to the caste of the talkative man; he can be anyone deeply immersed in telling tales. Domestic issues dominate his narrative. While some stories of the talkative man simply entertain. In some others, such as 'A Career', he pushes a moral message. In some of the stories, such as 'The Snake Song', he intelligently blends morality with fantasy.

'A Career', published in *An Astrologer's Day*, draws on the theme and style of the *akam* tales. The narrative centres on the relationship between the two individuals—the narrator and Ramu. Unconventionally Narayan opens the story with 'The Talkative man said'. The phrase implies that the author is more interested in telling tales rather than in writing. The story begins in a typical oral narrative style as the teller starts his conversation with the phrase 'years and years ago'. In the tradition of Kannada and Tamil folktales, there are specific openings and endings. Ramanujan argues that these devices take us into a "tale world", announcing our initiation into a different space.³⁶ These openings come in the way of identification with the narrator or the characters, separating the world of the listener from that of the stories, emphasizing their fictive nature, their artifice and fantasy.³⁷ A skilled performer, the talkative man, therefore, typically uses this narrative method to orally perform the narrative. While narrative tics seem to situate the tale in a never-never land, the street names, such as 'Lawley extension' or 'Market Road', or the very name of the shop 'The National Provision Stores', show the encroachment of colonial modernity. An ancient folk form is thus used to examine the colonial present.

³⁶ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Telling Tales', p. 461.

³⁷ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Telling Tales', p. 461.

Yet, amidst such a setting of colonial modernity, the talkative man proceeds to tell us the rather fantastic story of his life and his meeting with a stranger called Ramu. He narrates that he saw Ramu as a pure Brahmin who was facing a hardship and had been in search of occupation. His ragged condition forced the talkative man to appoint him as a helper in his house. The narrator had a big family and his wife needed some domestic help. Soon Ramu took over the Kitchen and pleased his wife with his work. Now, the talkative man started relying on him for his shop work also and in few years he became his confidant. Meanwhile, the narrator started a new business of selling butter to the merchants in Madras. However, one day Ramu stole away everything, leaving the retailer storyteller bankrupt. The teller in the end had to leave Malgudi and wander with his family from place to place. He had to face many challenges. Finally, he restored his fortune through a coffee business. One day, while he was moving through the Thirupati Hills, he saw Ramu. At first, he was not able to recognize him as Ramu was begging alms. He was now ragged and blind:

A year ago I was panting up the steps of Thirupati Hills. I had a vow to fulfill at the temple. I had passed two thousand steps when a familiar voice assailed my ears from among the group of mendicants lining the steps. I stopped and turned. And there he was, I could hardly recognize him now. I had seen him off at Malgudi station ten years before. His face was now dark, scared and pitted. His eyes were fixed in a gaze. I should have passed him without noticing if he hadn't called for alms.³⁸

What is implicit in the story is the overriding and rather crude moralism which aligns the 'short story' more with the genre of an oral folk tale of crime and punishment, without much psychological characterization. Brenda Breck claims, 'if epics tend to reflect ideals and also the class or caste norms, the shorter tales in India told by ordinary tellers make more of social

³⁸ R.K. Narayan, 'A Career', in *An Astrologer's Day* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1947), p. 122.

irregularities or faux pas'.³⁹ In the popular *akam* tales of the Kannada and Tamil region, we frequently see such narrative structure. In a tale called 'Charity Alone Conquers' collected by Natesa Sastri in 1893, a similar moral structure is present.⁴⁰ The tale speaks up against treachery and hints at the presence of retribution in human life.⁴¹ Narayan consciously borrows the themes and tics from such tales to create a contemporary story of betrayal. Just like any oral tale, the innocent retailer is rewarded whereas the treacherous Ramu is punished. Anand, too, in 'Five Short Fables' passes on the cultural wisdom, but in his narrative the heroism of a mother takes the center-stage. It is her struggle against odd that overtakes the narrative. In Narayan's adaptation of the Kannada folktale for writing short stories, we don't see such extended imagery. It is simply the story of betrayal and punishment that holds the plot.

The story, however, provides an ironic commentary on the caste structure of the Hindu society. As suggested in the introduction, in contrast to the epics that celebrate the Brahmin purity norms, the tales often provide a scathing commentary on the social structure. In many tales such as, of Tenali Ram in Kannada, one sees the protagonist rebuking the Brahmins for their greed. Narayan similarly protests against the traditional orthodox system through his short fiction. In the story, talkative man demolishes caste purity norms as the teller notes how he was awed by the three width ash marks - the sign of being a Brahmin - on Ramu's

³⁹Brenda Beck, 'Social Dyads in Indic Folktales', in A.K. Ramanujan and Stuart Blackburn ed., *Another Harmony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 76-102 (p. 100).

⁴⁰ Mrs. Howard Kingscote and Pundit Natesa Sastri, *Tales of Sun or Folklore of Southern India* (London: Allen & Co, 1890).

⁴¹ Mrs. Howard Kingscote and Pundit Natesa Sastri, *Tales of Sun or Folklore of Southern India*, p. 65. The tale narrates the relationship between two individuals—Subuddhi and Durbuddhi. One was the son of a King and the other was the Son of King's most royal minister. Subuddhi was kind-hearted and compassionate; whereas Durbuddhi was mean, selfish and cruel. One day Durbuddhi took King's Son to forest and tried to kill him; but is saved by the blessings of Goddess Kali. Later Subuddhi goes to another Kingdom and marries a beautiful Princess. Durbuddhi, on the other hand, was banished by his father and ran here and there in search of peace. One day Subuddhi through the window of his palace saw his friend in rags. He was unable to identify him, but later realizes that it his friend.

forehead and it was this purity sign that made him accept Ramu as his helper. But strangely he committed fraud and ran away. Hence, Narayan, like the composers of the oral tales, rebukes Brahmins and dismantles the social hierarchy.

What is remarkable, though, is the performance of the talkative man. As stated in the first chapter, performance is the first and most basic characteristic of the oral narration.⁴² Performance, argues Stuart Blackburn, is the art of delivery and stylization of a story within a context; it tells not “what” but “how”.⁴³ Performance, in other words, is what happens to a text in a context.⁴⁴ At the same time, Blackburn cautions that such analysis never denigrates the importance of the text; rather, it trains us to view a text from different angle.

Giving an example from *Kanthapura*, I have shown that the uniqueness of the performance lies in the performer’s ability to enhance or intensify the experience. Narayan, like Rao, faced the challenge in adopting the oral narrative style. While Rao brought in an old village woman to perform his story, Narayan created the character of the talkative man. The talkative man applies numerous stylistic features to evoke the sense of oral performance in the novel. His skills are revealed in the opening passage when he starts his narrative with the phrase ‘years and years ago’. His narration creates moments of pity for Ramu, as in ‘so young’. When the narrator, finally, sees Ramu at the temple stairs, he dramatically says ‘And there he was’ and describes his fate with a sense of redemption. Such phrases are cues within the oral performance to alert the audience to shifts in the narrative.⁴⁵

In contrast to the assumption of Blackburn that the South Indian tales are only moral, many oral tales are light-hearted, even bawdy. Georgiana Kingscote argues that the South

⁴² Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidasa*, p. 115.

⁴³ Stuart Blackburn, ‘Performance Markers in an Indian Story-Type’, in Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan ed., *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 167-94 (p. 168)

⁴⁴ Stuart Blackburn, ‘Performance Markers in an Indian Story-Type’, p. 168

⁴⁵ Stuart Blackburn, ‘Performance Markers in an Indian Story-Type’, p. 168.

Indian oral tales are full of “magic” and supernatural phenomenon play a great part in these stories.⁴⁶ Narayan as a teller knew the range of oral tales in South India and so he makes his talkative man narrate tales of every kind. If ‘A Career’ is moralistic, his other stories or tales such as ‘Old Man of the Temple’ is fantastic; whereas there are also some tales where the moral message is given through fantastic experience. I will now analyse ‘Old Man of the temple’ and then go on to examine ‘A Snake Song’ to understand Narayan’s engagement with the *akam* tales.

In ‘Old Man of the Temple’, published in *An Astrologer’s Day*, Narayan draws from the fabulous oral tales that are primarily meant for entertainment. For instance, Natesa Sastri translated a widely circulated tale called ‘Brahmarakshash’ in South India in 1890s.⁴⁷ In the tale a supernatural character of a demon appears to assist a landlord but denies moving away even after repeated requests. The wife of the landlord, in the end, applies a trick and the demon has to run away. The talkative man in ‘Old Man of the Temple’ narrates a similar story:

The Talkative Man said:

It was some years ago that this happened. I don’t know if you can make anything of it. If you do, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say; but personally I don’t understand it at all. It has always mystified me. Perhaps the driver was drunk; perhaps he wasn’t.⁴⁸

Narayan again opens the story with the phrase ‘The Talkative man said’. The story begins in routine style: ‘years and years ago’. The consistent use of second person pronouns to weave in the audience (‘if you can make anything of it’, ‘I shall be glad to hear what you have

⁴⁶ Mrs. Howard Kingscote and Pundit Natesa Sastri, *Tales of Sun or Folklore of Southern India*, p. xi.

⁴⁷ Mrs. Howard Kingscote and Pundit Natesa Sastri, *Tales of Sun or Folklore of Southern India*, p. 285.

⁴⁸ Narayan, p. 156.

to say') are the direct ties of the *akam* tales to establish rapport with the listener and create an air of suspense.

One of the characteristics of the oral tales, Propp argues, is that 'events that did not occur and could not have occurred are recounted with certain intonations and gestures, as though they did actually happen'.⁴⁹ Such method adds humour to the story. As a performer, the talkative man applies a similar tactic and creates an air of mystery when in the opening passage he says 'I don't know if you can make anything of it. If you do, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say; but personally I don't understand it at all. It has always mystified me'.⁵⁰ He goes on to invoke the supernatural through phrases such as 'dark half of the month', and 'surrounding country swallowed up in the night'. The talkative man intelligently dismisses the illogical part of the narrative at the outset. Commenting on the artistry of the talkative man, Frontain rightly argues: 'By grounding the improbable in details of such probability, Narayan pulls his narrative that seems to flow lazily onward, but which increasingly proves a breath-taking career into an increasingly unsettling world'.⁵¹

The talkative man goes on to portray a fabulous episode of meeting a 'dead man'. While coming back from Kumbakonam to Malgudi, he narrates an account of meeting the ghost of a person called Krishna Bhatt. The taxi of the teller suddenly stops near a temple and the driver changes into an old man. Doss, as an old man, narrates his past, claiming that he is Krishna Bhatt who lived 400 years ago. He explains that he was a rich merchant and used to organize the spring festival in the temple. Once, while he was coming back from his sister's home, a few dacoits assaulted him, and from that day he has been living in this temple. Bewildered by his nuisance, the talkative man urges him to acknowledge that he is dead and leave the body

⁴⁹ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Narayan, p. 156.

⁵¹ Raymond-Jean Frontain, 'Introduction', in Raymond-Jean Frontain and Basudeb Chakrabarti ed., *A Talent for the Particular: Critical Essays on R.K. Narayan* (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2011), p. 6.

of the doss, the taxi driver. The old man refuses to leave and the narrator finally has to apply a trick to get rid of the ghost. He asks him to remember his wife and help him unite with her. After much coaxing, the old man goes on to recall his wife Sita and leaves the body of the taxi driver.

The story, particularly the dialogue between the old man and the narrator, resonates with some deeply personal elements of Narayan's own life:

I told him, "Krishna Batt, you are dead, absolutely dead. You must try and go away from here."

"Where am I to go? Where am I to go?"

"Have you no one who cares for you?" I asked.

"None except my wife. I loved her very much."

"You can go to her."

"Oh, no. She died years ago..."

"Come on, think of her." He remained in deep thought for a while. He suddenly screamed,

"Seetha is coming! Am I dreaming or what? I will go with her..."⁵²

Susan Wadley argues that the telling of a folk "story" 'is ultimately three things: a discourse (linguistic event), a narrative (literary event), and a performance (cultural event)'.⁵³ According to Wadley much of the discourse is structured around a complex narrative and hence to the emerging performance. At the same time performance mode (written, spoken and or sung) is interrelated to the narrative. Hence, an aesthetically pleasant event that enthralls audience is constructed by the merging of the text and performance; therefore folklorists focus on the significance of the performer or narrator and proclaim that these performers are necessary for effective oral transmission. Following the performance-oriented approach, Kirin Narayan talks of the usefulness of the narrator/performer in oral narration.⁵⁴

⁵²Narayan, pp. 161-62.

⁵³ Susan Wadley, *The Kathā of Śakaṭ: Two Tellings*, p. 195.

⁵⁴ See Kirin Narayan, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon*, pp. 211-12. Many folklorists stress on the artistry of the narrator. See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954); Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Rowley, Mass:

She goes on to emphasise the artistry of Urmila Devi who narrated stories to her. As a story-teller Urmilla Devi not only shared some of the meanings of the tales but also explained their importance in the everyday life of an ordinary woman.

Immersed into his grand-mother's stories, Narayan was aware of the context in which he was writing his short fiction. To narrate his stories in the style of the oral story-teller, he constructs the talkative man who performs the tale in a conventional manner. With the opening passage he keeps a hold on his listener and merges the text with the performance to create an ideal aesthetic event. Here, he allegorically renders the personal life of Narayan. The author was writing these stories soon after losing Rajam. He had turned to certain magical exercises, attempting to meet his wife through automated writing in Madras during the 1940s.⁵⁵ The talkative man reproduces Narayan's experience and his love for his wife. The recognition is so powerful that it forces the ghost of Krishna Bhatt to leave. Thus, both Narayan and Anand use short stories to rewrite their personal experiences. While Anand elaborates his experiences of migration in 'Five Short Fables' through the metaphor of the leaf, tossed around by the winds, Narayan recreates some of the personal moments through the character of Krishna Bhatt.

Thus far I have examined one moral and one fantastic story of the talkative man. But in many of his other stories he conveniently mixes moral with fantastic to produce a new narrative. The *akam* tales often blend instruction with entertainment. There are tales that are meant both to "entertain" as well as "enlighten" the audience. 'The Snake Song', collected in *An Astrologer's Day*, draws its moral structure from such tales. The story establishes the importance of giving food to the beggar or hungry man through a fantastic episode. It opens

Newbury House, 1977); Mark Azadovskii, *A Siberian Tale Teller*, trans. James Dow (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974).

⁵⁵ Please see Susan Ram and N.Ram, *R.K. Narayan: The Early Years: 1906-1945*.

in a different style and Narayan, rather than using the characteristic style of the ‘talkative man said’, begins it with a conversation. A music festival is at the centre of the discourse. The talkative man, along with his friends, attends a music concert, but he is dissatisfied by the performance. His friends, however, enjoy the performance and ridicule him for his contempt for the musician. To convince his friends he goes on to narrate a story.

The talkative man takes his audience to a different space, a time when he was young and used to live in a village near Malgudi. He recounts that in his village lived a master musician. The artist was famous for his music and when he played his flute men, women and animal flocked around him in awe. The talkative man was so impressed by the musician that he wanted to learn music from the master. To learn music he used to wash his garments, clean his house and run errands for him. Consequently, the master taught him the flute, and following three years of thorough practice, he transformed into a competent flute player and tried to go to Madras. Hence, while the master was content to play his music in the village temple, the narrator wanted fame and money. It is this flaw of the talkative man that leads to his nemesis. Narayan here draws on the Hindu layers of his Tamil lineage, as in the traditional Hindu worldview, playing of music for fame or money is prohibited.⁵⁶

Once, when the teller is practising the raga *Bhairavi* in the middle of the night, a mendicant in the form of a beggar visits him and asks him for food, but he refuses to oblige him. The talkative man indulges in his practice for the sake of earning fame, and in his passion he forgets his master’s lesson, insulting the mendicant, saying: ‘if you don’t go, I will push you out’. But like the *akam* tales, fate punishes him for his indifference and the mendicant curses him, telling him that this will be the last day of his music. Later, out of

⁵⁶ John Thieme, *R. K. Narayan* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 10.

guilt, he wanders in the dark to find the unseen man, but he cannot find him. Soon after, he has a fantastic experience:

I looked at the pictures of gods on the wall and prayed to be protected from the threat of the unseen mendicant. And then I was lost in music once again ... I came to snake song in *punnaga Varalli* ... And now what I see between the door and me but a black cobra. It had opened its immense hood and was swaying ecstatically. I stopped my song and rubbed my eyes to see if I was fully awake. But the moment the song ceased, the cobra turned and threw a glance at me, and moved forward. I have never seen such a black cobra and such a long one in my life. Some saving instinct told me: "Play on; play on; Don't stop."⁵⁷

What is inherent in the passage is the frequent use of the supernatural. It records the encounter of the narrator with a large cobra in the middle of the night. Eventually, it marks the last day of the talkative man as a musician. He saves his life by playing his flute all the night, but is later advised not to play the flute in the future. He can play only when he finds the mendicant. In whole episode, the snake plays a significant role; it restricts the teller from playing flute. It is the source through which the mendicant's curse turns into a reality in the story.

In an *akam* tale, Ramanujan suggests, the snake plays an important role, but it represents different motifs in a male-centric and a female-centric folktale.⁵⁸ In the former, a snake is his rival; but in women-centric tales, it is a lover.⁵⁹ Hence, Narayan draws on the male-centric *akam* tale, and presents snake as the rival. Thus, Narayan, while writing his short stories in English, goes back to his childhood memories; he recollects a tale and transforms it into a tale set in contemporary times. Such experiments create what Javed Majeed calls 'narrative

⁵⁸ Please see A.K.Ramanujan, 'Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales', pp. 33-55.

⁵⁹ Please see Ramanujan, 'Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales', pp. 33-55.

amalgams', creating a new form of fiction.⁶⁰ However, he keeps the moral overtone of the folk tales, insisting that such ethical lessons are suitable to the modern times as well. In *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961), he conducts a similar experiment. If Narayan draws on the *akam* tales for his short stories, in his novel, he provides a modern rendition of the classical myth. I will now examine the novel and the manner in which Narayan experiments with the form of the fiction.

The Man-Eater of Malgudi: Myth or Folk Tale?

According to Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan, the traditional myth and folklore are distinctive in language, subject or its target-audience; however, in South Asia their 'method of production, distribution and consumption are similar'.⁶¹ An oral story might be a part of the established epic, yet is changed into a folktale through different performers, who translate or build up a new version through individual performance. Different folkloric components are added to make a new portrayal. The generic boundaries between myth and folktale are, therefore, blurred. Stuart Blackburn suggests that the literary production in South Asia, particularly in the Tamil region, shows 'a fluid interaction' between sophisticated literary technique, oral tradition, and writing.⁶² He goes on to argue that sometimes the written-down texts are the products of oral composition or they are scripts for oral performance.⁶³ Hence, the myth and folktale overlap in different ways. The same tale may function as a myth or work as a folktale in a domestic set-up. Narayan was of Tamil origin and so he draws on Tamil literary tradition, blurring the lines between myth and folktale in *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1961). The novel draws on the famous mythic episode of Bhasmasura and Mohini.

⁶⁰ Javed Majeed, 'Literary Modernity in South Asia', p. 268.

⁶¹ Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan, 'Introduction', in Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan ed., *Another Harmony*, p. 26.

⁶² Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, p. 20.

⁶³ Stuart Blackburn, *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, p. 20; A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore', p. 51.

The episode is well-known in the Kannada region. However, Narayan translates the myth on his own terms and constructs an alternative version that shows similarities as well as dissimilarities with the famous episode. In this section, I analyse the transformation of a myth into a folktale in order to demonstrate the unpredictable but exciting relationship between myth, folktale, and a literary text.

The myth of Bhasmasura and Mohini is as follows:

A demon named Bhasmasura did penance for thousands of years. Pleased by his tapas, Parvati, wife of Lord Shiva, asked Shiva to grant the demon a boon. Shiva granted Bhasmasura a boon that whatever he will touch with his palm will turn into ashes. The demon at once started to test his boon by placing his hand over Shiva's head. Shiva fled with terror and asked Vishnu for help. Vishnu took the form of a beautiful woman to entice the demon. On seeing such a beautiful woman, the demon became overwhelmed with lust. Mohini later asked him to dance with her. Bhasmasura started blindly following her gestures and so when Mohini kept her hand on her head, the demon soon followed the step and was burnt within moments.⁶⁴

The Man-Eater of Malgudi, published in 1961 is based on this mythic episode. In a lecture, Narayan observes:

At some point in one's career, one takes a fresh look at the so-called myths and legends and finds a new meaning in them. Suddenly I came across a theme which struck me as an excellent piece of mythology in modern dress. It was published under the title

⁶⁴ The original source of this myth is not known, but it is a famous Hindu myth and is popular in folk tradition in South as well as North India. The story is often performed in *Yakshgana*: a popular folk theatrical form of Kannada region. Gustav Oppert, *On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatvarsa or India* (London: A Constable & Co, 1893), p. 508. Wendy Doniger translates a different version and analyses the relationship between Shiva and Mohini. Please also see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgyne and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 321.

The Man-Eater of Malgudi. I based this story on a well-known Mythological episode, the story of Mohini and Bhasmasura.⁶⁵

The novel is set in Malgudi, and Narayan develops the characters of Vasu as Bhasmasura, and Rangi, as Mohini. While drawing on the famous mythic episode, however, Narayan adds new formulas to the epic episode as he domesticates, localizes and modernises the famous episode according to his interpretation.

Narayan's novel centers on a complex psychological drama played out in a small room. The printer, Nataraj, leads an ordered life in Malgudi. The little that he earns suffices his needs. The invasion of the taxidermist, Vasu, complicates the ordered world of the printer. Vasu forcibly grabs the attic of the printing press and keeps on bringing stuffed hyenas and pythons and finally, when Vasu in his exuberance attempts to kill the temple elephant Kumar, both comic and sinister complications ensue. Finally, Vasu is killed by his own might. Narayan's confession and the end of Vasu have led critics to compare the novel with the Bhasmasura-Mohini myth. Meenakshi Mukherjee, way back in 1972, argued that the novel has a clear mythical design, reiterated by references to Puranic conflict between *sura* and *asura*, with Nataraj as the forbearer of good forces and Vasu as the representative of evil.⁶⁶

Carrying forward the argument of Mukherjee, Ganeshwar Mishra reflects on the opening passage of the novel, stating that the framed picture of Goddess Laxmi imparts mythic connotation to the plot and explains the 'the framed picture' as a sight of the cultural transcript where epic symbols are used to impart traditional beliefs.⁶⁷ Similarly, Chitra Sankaran argues that Narayan suddenly fits the novel into an archetypal framework by

⁶⁵ R.K. Narayan, 'Gods, Demons and Modern Times', *The Literary Criterion* 3 (1972), 47-48.

⁶⁶ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 146.

⁶⁷ Ganeshwar Mishra, 'The Novel as Purana: A Study of the Form of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* and *Kanthapura*' in Geoffrey Kein, ed., *R.K. Narayan: Contemporary Critical Essays* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993), pp. 9-23 (p. 13).

introducing the Bhasmasura myth.⁶⁸ According to Sankaran the mythic dimension in the novel 'then becomes inescapable'.⁶⁹ There can be no disagreeing with this general line of argument, but what has been wholly overlooked is the way Narayan reinterprets and actively rewrites the mythic tale. There are lots of variations, as I intend to show, between the mythic version and Narayan's adaptation. And so, I argue that Narayan, by inverting, translating and localising the mythical episode, translates an epic story into an oral tale of Malgudi.

To establish the folk design of the novel, I will first analyse the contrasting characters of Vasu and Nataraj and then go on to discuss the character of Rangi and the temple elephant in the succeeding sections. Critics such as Mukherjee consider the character of Vasu as 'a demoniac creature'.⁷⁰ Mukherjee draws the conclusion from Sastri's (a minor character) parallelism. In order to emphasise the wickedness of Vasu, Sastri, 'a semi-Sanskrit scholar', retells a popular tale:

There was Ravana, the protagonist in Ramayana, who had ten heads and twenty arms ... The earth shook under his tyranny. Still he came to a sad end.

[...] Then there was Bhasamasura, who acquired a special boon that everything he touched should be scorched while nothing could destroy him. He made humanity suffer. God Vishnu was incarnated as a dancer of great beauty, named Mohini, with whom asura became infatuated. At one point in the dance, Mohini placed her palms on her head, and the demon followed this gesture in complete forgetfulness and was reduced to ashes that very second.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Chitra Sankaran, *The Myth Connection*, pp. 67-68.

⁷⁰ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 142.

⁷¹ R.K. Narayan, *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (London: William Heinemann Ltd), p. 97.

In the above episode, after seeing a stuffed hyena hanging over the staircase, Sastri compares Vasu—the taxidermist—with the anti-heroes of the epics. He transmits the story through an oral exposition. The legendary figures, ‘Ravana’ and ‘Bhasmasura’, are brought in to convey the villainy of Vasu. At the same time, *pace* Sastri, there is clear ambivalence on Narayan's part in the representation of Vasu. In a detailed study of the plot and character of the novel, Fakrul Alam shows that Narayan's narrative is complicated, and it is wrong to attribute fixed binaries to mythic tales.⁷² For him, neither Nataraj nor Vasu can be seen in black and white terms. The event cannot be read as an epic confrontation between the two characters, with Vasu, in the words of George Woodcock, modeled in ‘the role of the malign Titan Ravanna’, pitted in a ‘great fight between good and evil forces’ against the Nataraj and his friends.⁷³

Vasu, no doubt, leads a chaotic life, frequently changing his profession. He has no family, nor any permanent occupation. Still, he shows a certain amount of chivalry to Nataraj when he says, ‘you are a wise guy’.⁷⁴ Hence, Alam concludes that Vasu is in fact brutal, self-centred, menacing; he has no respect for law; he loves to bully the weak; and he will do anything to achieve the goals he has set out for himself; but Alam goes on to conclude that Vasu is also spontaneous in his responses, spirited in his attitude towards life, good-humoured, and endearingly nonsensical in his way of looking at others.⁷⁵ Kalyan Chatterjee, too, comments that ‘Vasu is not a *rakshasha*; he is a human and was born as such’.⁷⁶

⁷² Please see Fakrul Alam, ‘Plot and Character in R.K. Narayan's “The Man-Eater of Malgudi”: A Reassessment’, *Ariel*, 19 (1988), 77-92.

⁷³ George Woodcock, “Two Commonwealth Novelists: R.K. Narayan and V.S. Naipaul”, *Sewanee Review* 87 (1979), 1-28 (p. 21).

⁷⁴ Narayan, p. 18.

⁷⁵ Fakrul Alam, ‘Plot and Character in The Man-Eater of Malgudi,’ p. 79.

⁷⁶ Kalyan Chatterjee, ‘R.K. Narayan's *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*: Symbol and Allegory’, in Raymond-Jean Frontain and Basudeb Chakraborti ed., *A Talent for the Particular: Critical Essays on R.K. Narayan* (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2011), pp. 147-164 (p. 153-4).

Similarly, Nataraj cannot be the forbearer of just virtuous qualities as he too is a similarly complex character.

Given the complexity, I argue, it is useful to see the characters as forming a dyad between the passive/aggressive or oppressor/oppressed of the folktales. Brenda Beck, through extensive study of Thompson's motif index, has shown that 'most South Asian folktales form dyads that contain unequal partners; most such relationships are competitive and; the lesser or junior partner usually triumphs in the end'.⁷⁷ She classifies them as passive/aggressive or weaker/stronger or even oppressor/oppressed and goes on to argue that 'nearly all of the human/human dyads that contain non-kinsmen of the same sex culminate in the triumph of the weaker'.⁷⁸ The moral relationship between oppressor and oppressed is prominent in folktales, and they show the rebellion on the part of the weaker partner or over-exploitation by the superior one. "Folktales", argues Beck, 'specifically address the situation where loyalty is undermined, either by rebellion on the part of the inferior partner, or by excessive exploitation and domination on the part of the superior'.⁷⁹ Narayan's narrative shows a similar pattern; he forms a dyadic relationship between Vasu and Nataraj.

Vasu is shown as physically powerful and ferocious: 'He was a large man, about six feet tall. He looked quite slim, but his bull-neck and hammer-fist revealed his true stature'.⁸⁰ Just like the superior member of the passive/aggressive dyad, Vasu acquires enormous physical strength through his guru in Nagpur. He met his master at a show and found that he could bear 'a half-ton stone slab on his cheek' and 'snap steel chains'. The man was strong enough to pulverise a hard block of granite with his fist. Vasu became his disciple and trained himself

⁷⁷Brenda Beck, 'Social Dyads in Indic Folktales', p. 82. Beck's study is primarily based on the motif index constructed by Thompson and Roberts in 1960. Motif index is the classification of narrative elements in ballads, tales, myths and other forms of oral narratives.

⁷⁸ Brenda Beck, 'Social Dyads in Indic Folktales', p. 82.

⁷⁹Brenda Beck, 'Social Dyads in Indic Folktales', p. 83.

⁸⁰ Narayan, p. 13.

to become a *pehalwan*. On his first day of the show, he was able to bang on a century-old door of a house in Lucknow and was soon able to snap chains, twist iron bars, and pulverise granite. Later, he turns towards 'killing animals' and smuggling them across various countries, making a lot of money through this vocation. It was his search for animals that brought him into the parlour of Nataraj: he wanted to print his card 'H.Vasu, M.A., Taxidermist'. Intriguingly Vasu was a former Gandhian; he had participated in the civil disobedience of Mahatma Gandhi. The relocation of Vasu from non-violence to violence as suggested by his profession also provides an ironic commentary to the disillusionment of the masses with the politics of Gandhi and his ideas of non-violence.

Later on, Narayan goes on to describe multiple episodes to establish the hyper-masculinity/physical superiority of Vasu. For instance, in an episode where Nataraj and Vasu are heading towards the Mempi forest, Vasu knowingly drives his jeep towards the peasant woman who was sitting on the roadside. When Nataraj questions his motive, he carelessly replies that 'these women are hardy and enjoy a bit of fun'. In another scene, Vasu invites the narrator to his attic to display his art. Nataraj is left bewildered to see 'in a corner a stuffed crow, a golden eagle, and a cat'. He at once recognises the cat that used to prowl in his press. He recollects the soft mew of the innocent animal. Showing his anguish, he asks Vasu the reason behind the killing. Vasu, once again, mischievously replies that he wanted it for study. The sight of the animals leaves the narrator despondent. He feels disgusted but remains quiet. Hence, Narayan shows Vasu as an oppressor who enjoys bullying the weak.

Nataraj is the weaker partner of the dyad who is over-exploited by Vasu. Narayan creates a modest character in Nataraj from the beginning of the novel. In the South Asian oral tales, as Brenda Beck argues, the narrator celebrates the human characteristics of modesty and

generosity and therefore Narayan constructs a modest character in Nataraj.⁸¹ Also, while commenting on the blending of epic narrative with South Indian folk culture, Kalyan Chatterjee argues that the most interesting character of the folklore in India is the domestication of the lord.⁸² Analysing the name “Nataraj”, he goes on to evaluate the benovolence of the printer.⁸³ Indeed Shiva another name of Nataraj, the Lord of Dance, the most powerful and revered god of Hindu trinity is also considered “an easy god” who loves his devotees and is easily pleased. In folklore often singers sing in praise of the deity with a certain lovingness and humour.⁸⁴ Narayan replicates the image of the divine god in order to translate an epic tale into a domestic story. Like Shiva, Nataraj is shown to be easily gullible, a modest man with a fondness for company.

Alam argues that Nataraj has charm and a sense of virtue.⁸⁵ He leads a happy life with his two friends, Sen, and poet. The world of Nataraj, beyond the ‘blue curtain’, is symbolic of his ordered life. The image of Goddess Lakshmi poised on her lotus sufficed his needs. He was taught ‘never to kill’ and whenever he swatted flies, he had to do it without the knowledge of the elders. But he fears Vasu.

The profession of taxidermy brought Vasu to Malgudi where, in the nearby Mempi forest, he starts killing innocent animals. Meanwhile, he also manages forcibly to grab the upper floor of Nataraj’s printing press. The press soon turns into a place filled with animal corpses. When Vasu calls the narrator to see his stuffed tiger, Nataraj feels disgusted to see the number of dead animals: ‘on his work bench in a corner stood a stuffed crow, a golden eagle, and a cat’. He is appalled at the sight of his printing press, but had no courage to go up to

⁸¹ Please see Brenda Beck, ‘Social Dyads in Indic Folktales’, p. 83.

⁸² Kalyan Chatterjee, ‘R.K. Narayan’s *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*: Symbol and Allegory’, p. 149.

⁸³ Kalyan Chatterjee, ‘R.K. Narayan’s *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*: Symbol and Allegory’, p. 149.

⁸⁴ See conclusion.

⁸⁵ Fakrul Alam, ‘Plot and Character in R.K. Narayan’s ‘The Man-Eater of Malgudi: A Reassessment’, p. 78.

Vasu and say, 'Take yourself and your museum out of here!' He felt dwarfed and tongue-tied. Even after realising that Vasu had killed Garuda (the golden eagle), the sacred bird, he remains submissive. And even when he frenetically attempts to organise the spring festival, trusting himself to do the enormous task, he succumbs to Vasu's design. The taxidermist has, as Kalyan Chatterjee puts it, 'a peculiar hold on Vasu'. The reason for this hold has intrigued the critics and they have commented in their own ways to understand this baffling relation. I argue that it is part of the folk design of the text. In order to form a dyad between the two, Narayan deliberately constructs the two characters—one strong and dominating, other weak and passive.

The folkloric dyad of passive/aggressive between Vasu and Nataraj is also obvious in their relationship with Rangi. Vasu is sexually aggressive and forms relationships with a number of women, including Rangi, during his stay in Malgudi. Rangi, as Nataraj states, is 'obsessed with the grandeur and invincibility of the man'.⁸⁶ Vasu's prowess subdues her. Even while exposing the evil designs of Vasu, Rangi consistently implores Nataraj to be careful. While talking to Nataraj, she even asks him to 'keep the sound low'. Also, Rangi is not the only woman to frequent his inner household. One only had to stand on his staircase, anywhere between seven and eight in the morning, the narrator notes caustically, to see women coming down through the staircase: 'brisk traffic passed on the staircase'. On the contrary, Nataraj shows passivity in his love for Rangi. At times, he tries to acquire Vasu's aggression but, paradoxically enough, remains unusually submissive in courting her.⁸⁷ From the moment he receives the report from Sastri, Nataraj is fascinated by the presence of "a loose woman" - Rangi - in his attic. He spies on Vasu's love-life through a pin-hole in the curtain and is ready to shed his monogamy. Totally aroused, and eager to be swallowed by

⁸⁶Narayan, p. 210.

⁸⁷ Fakrul Alam, 'Plot and Character in R.K. Narayan's 'The Man-Eater of Malgudi: A Reassessment', p. 77.

her embrace, he keeps on passively courting her. However, he never even dares to speak to her. Even when she comes to see him in the din of the night to inform him about Vasu's evil plan, she is parted by a grill and Nataraj is unable to cancel the distance. Rangi, instead of regarding him as a potential lover, keeps on treating Nataraj as a 'good man', considering him a Messiah who could save Malgudi from the ferocious Vasu.

The passive/aggressive dyad becomes more relevant when the conflict reaches its climax. Vasu conspires to kill the temple elephant, Kumar. The printer's heart sinks at the sight of the elephant and even when he is 'obsessed with the plans to save the elephant and the lives of the people'; he has no idea about how to do so. The narrator finally blacks out with dread and uneasiness and surges back home. Muthu, alongside the Poet, Sen, and the Veterinary specialist, come to see him, and together they choose to inform the police. Later, they all, except Nataraj, hurry to Vasu and request that he avoid the event. Vasu, though, is determined to kill the elephant, as well as the men and women participating in the procession. Thus, he declines to bow down. Even when Muthu warns him that he is the elephant of the Goddess, he remains diffident. When asked about the presence of women and children in the procession, he rudely replies, 'if men are to be caught in a stampede, why not women and children also? What's the point in saving women and children?'⁸⁸ Instead of attempting to save Kumar and Malgudi from destruction, Nataraj confines himself to his *pyol*, leaving Malgudi to destiny. Later, he visits the press and implores with Vasu:

'Vasu, I have come to appeal to you not to harm our elephant tonight.'
'Well suppose I decide to shoot that elephant, what can you do about it?'
I had no answer. I only asked, 'what has the poor elephant done to you?'
What more can a man want? I could retire for a year on the proceeds of one elephant.'
I said, 'whatever horrible plans you may have, remember there will be thousands of people around- men, women, and children dragging the chariot.'... 'A few will be trampled and choked in a stampede' I said ... I trembled with excitement and helplessness. I dared not say anything more, lest he should hit me. I pleaded, 'Vasu,

⁸⁸ Narayan, p. 416.

you are a human being with feelings like any of us. I am sure you are pretending to be so wild.' He laughed. He seemed delighted at the way he had brought me down.⁸⁹

In the passage, Narayan underlines the contrast between the two characters as in 'he laughed', 'he seemed delighted at the way he had brought me down'. The phrases directly link to the folk design of the text where Nataraj is shown begging for the life of the temple elephant. He is overpowered by Vasu. While analyzing the Indian oral tales, Brenda Beck claims that 'where the story hero is the superior figure, then interaction with a lesser is likely to be supportive; but when a tale unfolds from the point-of-view of a lower ranking figure the challenge originate from the below'.⁹⁰ She goes on to argue that, in most of the tales, though, the lower-ranking person wins the battle: 91% of the tales, she notes, celebrate the victory of the underdog.⁹¹ While writing modern fiction, Narayan draws from the oral narrative and constructs the rivalry between the two characters. Vasu and Nataraj are pitted against each other to form a compelling story of enmity and competition between two males. He shows Nataraj pleading to Vasu for the life of the elephant and the men, women and children participating in the temple procession. The narrative unfolds from the point-of-view of Nataraj. Intriguingly, it is a low-caste and marginalized woman that finally leads to Nataraj's victory.

A lot has been written on quiet and ordered world of Narayan's Malgudi. Many critics consider Narayan as apolitical novelist who had nothing to do with caste and gender issues.⁹² Most of such readings consider Narayan, an orthodox Brahmin who had little vision for the society. For instance, William Walsh refers to Narayan as a Brahmin of "purest stock".⁹³

⁸⁹Narayan, p. 174-75.

⁹⁰ Beck, 'Social Dyad in Indic Tales', p. 87.

⁹¹ Beck, 'Social Dyad in Indic Tales', p. 87.

⁹² See Rosemary Marangoly George, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature*.

⁹³ William Walsh, *R. K. Narayan: A Critical Appreciation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 25.

However, beyond the superficial ordered world of Malgudi, there lays in every work of Narayan a layered reality that directly confronts the caste or gender discrimination. Here, also we find the political undertone beneath a so-called “ordered” or “authentic world”. Rivalry between the two males and the final victory of the underdog with the help of “a loose woman” speaks volumes about the caste and gender politics of Narayan’s Malgudi. The period when Narayan began to publish his novels was a period when caste politics dominated the public discourse. The well known rivalry between Gandhi and Ambedkar was at its prime. Regionally an upsurging Dravidian politics further emboldened caste politics in South India. Narayan is often accused of brushing out the complex sociological question born out of caste divide. A similar charge is levelled on him regarding his notions of Indian femininity. Refuting these accusations, in 1971, Narayan in an interview countered his critiques by pointing out the gender politics in his writings:

Sometimes I hear them say that I do not reflect the great urge of the nation whatever that may be, I don’t understand what they are saying. No one can express the urge of a nation. But compare my new novel *The Painter of Signs* with *The Dark Room* that’s a contrast. The new liberated woman and completely suppressed housewife, you see a whole social change.⁹⁴

Narayan, here, clarifies his views on feminism and elucidates that how his realistic novels have tapped into the changing social behavior. Similarly, through stories and novels, Narayan has often negated the often prevalent caste politics in India.

Rangi as Mohini (an incarnation of Vishnu) comes to Nataraj’s rescue and finally prevents Malgudi from destruction.⁹⁵ The episode resembles the Bhasmasura-Mohini mythic

⁹⁴R. K. Narayan’s conversation with Alex Hamilton, *The Guardian*, 12 September, 1971, p. 16.

⁹⁵ Writers such as V.S. Naipaul criticises Narayan for his Hindu-centric vision. In a sharp criticism of Narayan's work, he declares his novels as religious fables, intensely Hindu. At the same time critics

episode, but true to the folkloric tradition, the moral relationship between the characters shows a negative feeling about the highhandedness and arrogance of Vasu and creates moments of sympathy for Nataraj the weaker partner of the dyad, and hence displays support for the underdog. Finally, Nataraj wins. Rangi becomes the catalyst for the end of Vasu and protects Kumar. The inversion of the status of a so-called 'disreputable' woman is interesting and allows the author to recreate a counter/new-version of the classical myth. I will now discuss representation of Rangi as Mohini to understand Narayan's rendition of the mythical episode.

Rangi as Mohini: *Devadasi* politics and the narrative fiction

The term *devadasi* derives its name from Tamil word *tevardiyal*, which translates as 'Slave of the god' and refers to the class of women who, through various ceremonies of marriage, dedicated themselves to the deities of the temple and other ritual objects.⁹⁶ The status of the *devadasi* became a contentious issue during the nineteenth and the twentieth century. In the pre-colonial period, *devadasis* enjoyed a respectable position and were considered 'nityasumangala' (auspicious).⁹⁷ However, after the enforcement of the colonial law on the Indian subject, the status of the dancing women became complex as they stood far

such as Tabish Khair argues that his stress is on 'existential', not 'spiritual', maturity and in the process he has given voice to individual perspective and semi-urbanized societies. See V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 12. Also see Anita Desai, 'R.K. Narayan and the Grand Malgudi Circus', in *The Washington Post Book World*, 4 (1983); Tabish Khair, *Babus Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 232.

⁹⁶ Amrit Srinivasan, 'Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and her Dance', *Economic and Politic Weekly*, 20 (1985), 1869-1876 (p. 1869).

⁹⁷ The classical example of the Kingly patronage involving the *devadasis* comes from Tanjore. An inscription dated 1004CE records the transfer of 400 temple women from other temples to the Raja rajeshwar Temple by arrangement of Rajaraja Chola I. These women lived in the four streets around the temple and were allowed tax-free land from the temple's endowment. See Sasika C.Kersenboom-Story, *Nityasumangali* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1987).

beyond the Hindu marriage law and tradition. Finally, with the passage of the Act of 1947, the *devadasi* practice was prohibited in Madras and its adjoining areas. The passage of the bill led to ‘the misery in the life of *devadasi*’.⁹⁸ The women were expelled from the temples immediately after the act was passed. Many vacated rural areas and migrated to the cities to become clandestine prostitutes.

Narayan is among the few authors writing in English to comment on the politics of *devadasis*. Narayan keenly observed the politics behind their banishment and represented their condition in his two consecutive novels, *The Guide* (1958) and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* (1961). If Rosy of *The Guide* represents the moments within the revival movement where the famous ‘sadir’ dance of the temple dancers was transformed into a national heritage (*Bharatnatyam*), Rangi represents the harsh realities of the effects of the passage of the 1947 Act.⁹⁹ Narayan perceptively models Rangi as Mohini of the mythical episode, for Mohini is an overtly sexualized mythical character who is well-versed in dancing and singing.¹⁰⁰ A *devadasi* is perfect for the modern rendition of the mythical episode. At the same time, while doing so, Narayan provides an insight into the politics behind the *devadasi* movement and their status after the passage of the contentious bill. In this section, I analyse the representation of Rangi as Mohini and the manner in which Narayan transforms an epic narrative into a social saga.

⁹⁸ K.Y. Jordon, *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), p. 132.

⁹⁹ For a detail study see Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Dवेश Soneji ed., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁰ Mohini is the incarnation of Vishnu and a divine seductress. She enchants men into love and later leads them to their doom. See Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgyne and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



Figure 3.2 A photograph of two Devadasis taken in 1920s in Madras (now Chennai)

courtesy Wikipedia open source

To understand this, it is important briefly to explain the politics behind the status of *devadasis* in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. From the late sixteenth-century *Nayak* period onwards, *devadasis* functioned as courtesans, secular dance artists, and temple workers.¹⁰¹ A *Devadasi* during this period had a degree of social agency as they were beyond the patrifocal kinship and lived in matrilineal communities. They had conjugal relationships with upper-caste men, and were well-versed in reading and writing. Amrit Srinivasan argues the unconventional social tradition constructed a particular model of women which held a unique religious office.¹⁰² They provided a contrast to the conscious theological rejection of the puritanical ascetic ideas for women in the *bhakti* movement. The *devadasi* formed the basis of a unique and specialised temple artisan caste, which displayed ‘in its internal

¹⁰¹Davesh Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasi, Memory, and Modernity in South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 3.

¹⁰² Amrit Srinivasan, ‘Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and her Dance’, p. 1873.

organisation the operation of pragmatic, competitive and economic considerations, encouraging a sophisticated profession and artistic activity'.¹⁰³ With the rise of the anti nautch-girl movement in India, the status of *devadasi* was challenged. The new caste and gender norms questioned the presence of a class of women who professed non-conjugal relationships but were still considered respectable.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the campaign against the *devadasi* became vigorous. A loud protest against the *dasis* and her tradition is heard in some of the literary works produced during this period. Men composed many of these texts; they, through a graphic descriptive mode or satire, combine 'literary virtuosity with a moralising discourse that inevitably maligns courtesans'.¹⁰⁴ Works of this kind begin with the text of Kandukuri Viresalingam (1848-1919), a Brahmin from Rajahmundry, and then continue in the work of Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy. In Racavetikavi's *Gaṇikāguṇaparvatana Tārāvali*, published in 1864 in Madras, the temple dancers are shown as cunning, women who ensnare innocent men into their trap and inflict the pain of venereal disease on them. The dancer also turns her partner into a cook or servant in her house. This motif appears five times in the text, displaying that any transgression of defined gender roles is unacceptable.¹⁰⁵ Another important text from the period, *Varakanta*, with the English subtitle *The Nautch Girl*, a Telugu novel by Raja M.Bhujanga Rau Bahadur, Zamindar of Elluru, published in 1904, was based on a professional dancing woman and on her relationship with a married man. The writer falls back on the well-known trope of the money-hungry courtesan and sacred wife. In poems such as 'Vesya' ['whore'], written during the 1930s, the poet shows his pleasure at the state of the performers who were fleeing from the city in fear. Daves Soneji, therefore, rightly argues that 'the focus of these texts is on the intensity of the sexual experiences shared

¹⁰³ Amrit Srivivasan, 'Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and her Dance', p. 1873.

¹⁰⁴ Daves Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasi, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁵ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, p. 90.

by the *dasis* and their lovers, but the innocent young men are fleeced by *dasis*, wander about Madras like beggars, and ultimately contract the disease'.¹⁰⁶ Such vilification of *devadasis* continued till 1947.

The nationalist leaders of the early twentieth century, too, echoed the concerns of the upper-class elite Brahmins as well as the above-cited authors. They show their worry about the status of the so-called impure woman. For instance, Annie Besant wrote in 1919:

So there are authentic records to prove these Dasi girls were pure virgins spending their time in religious study, meditation and devotional service in the temples akin to the Roman Catholic nuns of the present day. Nowadays we find to our great sorrow that all their accomplishments such as music and dance are being utilised in the majority of cases to promote their evil and immoral trade and to drag the imprudent and unwary youth of the country into immorality and vice and hence the word “dasi” has become one of reproach.¹⁰⁷

Valorising the ancient imagery of *dasis*, Besant critiques contemporary *dasis* for being immoral. Here, she willfully ignores the independent sexuality of the temple performers. Mahatma Gandhi similarly wrote about them after meeting a group of *dasis* in 1921:

I had my full say at Rajahmundry on an important matter, and I hope that some Telugu friend will reproduce that speech, translate it, and spread it among hundreds of our countrymen. It was about ten o'clock last night in Cocanada that dancing girls paid me a visit when I understood the full significance of what they were. I felt like sinking in the earth below...I ask you, brothers and sisters, to send me assurance, as early as possible, that there is not a single dancing girl in this part of land. I charge these sisters who are

¹⁰⁶ Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, p. 93.

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Muthulaxmi Reddy, *Why Should the Devadasi Institution in the Hindu Temples Be Abolished?* (Chintadripet: Central Co-operating Works Ltd., 1927), p. 3.

sitting behind me to go about from place to place, find out every dancing girl, and shame men into shunning the wrong they are doing.¹⁰⁸

Gandhi, like Besant, shows concern for the *dasis* and urges for their rehabilitation. But their politics, linked to the valorisation of the idea of marriage and domesticity, is deeply conservative. For Gandhi, any relationship outside of marriage was inconceivable and so the practical method of reforming the class was to marry them off into “respectable” households. Following Gandhi, Yamini Purnatilakam set up an institution in 1923 in Madras called *Hindu Yuvti Sarnalayam* to rehabilitate *devadasis*. But such institutions were short-lived and worked for less than a decade. Later, with the help of nationalists such as Muthulakshmi Reddy, the *devadasi* tradition was finally banned in Madras residency in 1947 through an act called the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947.

Narayan was born in 1906. He had stayed in Madras till 1922 and had later gone to Mysore.¹⁰⁹ He must have experienced the debate surrounding the *devadasis* at first hand, and so when he began to rewrite a mythic episode on his terms, he selected a *devadasi* to play Mohini in his novel. As stated above, *dasis* were considered erotically “excessive” and were well versed in *ratimudras* (erotic gestures). Mohini, in the classical mythology, is well-versed in dance and is highly sensual. The character of Rangi is, therefore, more than suitable to play the role of the divine incarnation of Vishnu. What is striking, however, is the reversal of the mythic episode. In the legendary epic, Mohini is at once divine and erotic; Narayan’s Mohini, however, is a betel-chewing prostitute. In spite of being a *dasi*, Rangi knows nothing about

¹⁰⁸ M.K.Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice* (Ahmadabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1942), p. 174.

¹⁰⁹ In 1798, the British Colonial administration declared Madras as the capital of the Madras Presidency. Since then, it became the center of the cultural and political activity in South India. Towards the late nineteenth century, Brahmins, particularly of the Smarta subgroup, began to dominate the political and social scene in Madras city, combining the agendas of nationalist activism, social reform and cultural regeneration. See Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Daves Soneji ed., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India*, p. 13. Also see Mary Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

dance. Such reversal provides an ironic commentary to the status of the performers. A similar reversal of episode is seen in the *Ramayana* story in South India.¹¹⁰ Narayan critiques the reform movement for the marginalisation of *dasis*, and models the epic episode on his terms.

Narayan introduces Rangi in the following manner:

At the hyena's corner one day Sastri heard the jingling of bangles and turned to see a woman go down the steps and out of the building. He had been at the machine. I was in the front office, and presently the curtain parted and he peeped in. A look at his face and I knew something was wrong—some matter referring to Vasu.

[...] He swallowed once or twice before saying, 'All sorts of low-class women are wandering around this press nowadays...'

'Where? Who are they?

[...] I had never seen him so worried before. Even the first shock at finding a hyena beyond the grille had been nothing to what he seemed to face now. I stood beside him without a word except to sound bossy, 'There is too much ink. Watch the inking.'

He ignored my fussy advice and said, if this sort of thing goes on, our reputation in the town will be ruined. I saw Rangi going downstairs. Is she the sort of person we should encourage here? Is this a printing press or what?¹¹¹

Sounding a reproachful note, Sastri, an upper-class Brahmin, coerces the presence of Rangi. Sastri, in the novel, is the connoisseur of the national imaginaries and identities that inflicted class and caste anxieties in the mid-twentieth century. Being an orthodox Brahmin,

¹¹⁰Please see Paula Richman, ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

¹¹¹ Narayan, p. 107.

highly immersed in the idea of purity and impurity, he rejects the presence of ‘low-caste women’ in the press. His language is sultry and echoes the reformist ideology that denigrated the *devadasi* tradition. For him, Rangi as *devadasi* is impure and diseased. His anxiety is loudly revealed in his statements such as, ‘Is she the sort of person we should encourage here? Is this a printing press or what?’ Sastri’s reactions on seeing a *devadasi* are remarkably consistent: ‘All sorts of low-caste woman are around this press nowadays...’; ‘If this sort of thing goes on, our reputation in the town will be ruined’. After repetitive questions from Nataraj, he finally, with much reluctance, goes on narrating the life history of Rangi. He describes that she is the daughter of Padma, ‘an exemplary, traditional, dedicated woman of the temple, who could sing and dance’. With much hesitation, he goes on to reveal her father, Damodar, who is Sastri’s friend and neighbour in Abu Lane. However, when it comes to Rangi, Sastri calls her ‘the worst woman’ who has ever come to Malgudi. According to him, she is a subject of constant reference in Abu Lane and was responsible for a great deal of politics there. This exposes the trajectory of the loss in the status of *devadasi* between 1920 and 1950.

If Sastri regularly demeans Rangi and despises her presence in the press, Nataraj is overwhelmed to see her and turns her into a sexual object: ‘she was dark squat seductive,’ ‘a perfect female animal’. As noted above, *devadasis* were considered “excessively” erotic during the twentieth century, and therefore, drawing on the image of the *dasis* through various references, Nataraj infers her as a highly sexualised female. Eager to be swallowed by her and ready to abandon his monogamous chastity, Nataraj pursues Rangi: ‘The light touched her high cheek-bones and I found myself saying, “Not bad, not bad. Her breasts are billowy, like those one sees in temple sculptures. Her hips are also classical”’.¹¹² He goes on courting Rangi and spies on the love life of Vasu through a pin-hole. When she appears in the

¹¹² Narayan, p. 157.

din of the night to inform Nataraj about Vasu's plan, he is excited. He lets his mind slide into a wild fantasy of seduction and passion. He tries to get nearer to Rangī, but miserably fails to do so.

By contrast, Rangī shows almost a sense of reverence towards Nataraj. She works for Vasu and is his mistress but shows a rare sense of dignity when speaking to the printer. When Nataraj calls her an opium seeker, she retorts:

She glared at me angrily, 'Sir, I am only a public woman, following what is my dharma. I may be a sinner to you, but I do nothing worse than what so-called family women are doing. I observe our rules'.¹¹³

In many ways, this is one of the most powerful moments in the representation of women in Narayan's oeuvre and in South Asian fiction more generally as he rewrites the fallen *dasi* as morally imperious, challenging and resolute, refusing to be cowered or stigmatised. A key word is 'dharma': a polysemous word, usually translating as 'religious duty', it was almost ubiquitously used in late 19th and early 20th century from novelists, particularly Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, to define an indigenous realm of culture against Western science and dominance.¹¹⁴ With its roots in the classical epics, there was something sacrosanct, almost sacred, about the word: Narayan brilliantly transposes it from the realm of religion and politics to that of the *nautch*-girl or *devdasi*, at once reclaiming the word and investing the profession with a new-found sense of moral rectitude and order. One sees a similar representation of women in the novels of Sudhin Ghose. Belonging to the upper-middle class *bhadralok* community of Bengal, Ghose (I will discuss this in detail in the fourth chapter)

¹¹³ Narayan, p. 158.

¹¹⁴ There has been an important body of work on the reconceptualisation of 'dharma' in 19th-century Bengal, particularly with reference to Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay: see Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (London: SOAS Studies in South Asia, 1998).

knew the unevenness of the Bengal woman's reform and therefore in his novels he creates character of a nautch girl to subvert western models of conjugality as well as feudal patriarchy's notions of Indian womanhood.

Rangi's speech can also be found as a powerful subaltern protest against marriage as an institution as well as a statement against the nationalist leaders' configuration of women's sexuality. Banned and disregarded for their sexual freedom, the *dasis* were continuously reprimanded by Brahmins such as Sastri. Rangi protests against the vilification of the dancers. Almost as if to refute the narrow sectarian and prejudiced views of men such as Sastri, Narayan shows her endangering her life to save the temple elephant Kumar. Vasu, plotting to kill Kumar, confides in his mistress Rangi. Without fearing Vasu, she comes to Nataraj to seek his help: 'It must not be shot. Sir, you must somehow see that he doesn't do it. Please save the elephant'.¹¹⁵ She goes on to add 'he may kill me for speaking, but I don't care. I want to save poor Kumar'.¹¹⁶ In a flash, we get to see the nobility of Rangi, as at that point of the story the reader, like her, is desperate to save the temple elephant. Towards the end of the novel, when Vasu dies in his room, the citizens of Malgudi suspect Nataraj to be the murderer. It is Rangi who reveals the events leading to the death of Vasu and protects Nataraj from the accusation relating to murder:

When he understood that the procession might start late, he set the alarm clock and sat himself in his easy chair. He drew another chair beside his, and commanded the woman to sit down with a fan in hand and keep the mosquitoes off him. He hated mosquitoes, from what the woman tells me. Armed with the fan, the woman kept away the mosquitoes. He dozed off. After a little time she dozed off too, having had a fatiguing day as you know,

¹¹⁵ Narayan, p. 158.

¹¹⁶ Narayan, p. 161.

and the fanning must have ceased; during this phase the mosquitoes returned in a battalion for a fresh attack.

Rangi was awakened by the yelling, 'Damn these mosquitoes'! She saw him flourish his arms like a madman, fighting them off as they buzzed about his ears to suck his blood. Next minute she heard a sharp noise like a thunder-clap. The man had evidently trapped a couple of mosquitoes that had settled on his forehead by bringing the fat palm with all his might on top of them. 'It was also the end of Vasu,' concluded Sastri, and added, 'The fist was meant to batter thick panels of teak and iron.'¹¹⁷

Teresa Hubel in her essay 'Devadasi Defiance and the Man-eater of Malgudi' calls 'Rangi a woman of radical differences' and argues that 'she chooses to conduct her sexual life without the social sanction of marriage'.¹¹⁸ But, still she accuses Narayan of chauvinism saying that he colludes, finally, in society's dismissal of the temple dancer.¹¹⁹ We find an inherent paradox in the statement of Hubel as she glorifies Rangi but critiques Narayan for his indifference to her. I contest the version of Hubel and rather suggest that the end of Vasu is in itself indicative of the elevation of the status of the temple dancer.

Sastri narrates the episode of Vasu's death to Nataraj. Confused and appalled by the killing of Vasu, the citizens of Malgudi accuse Nataraj. Nataraj too feels guilty for Vasu was his sworn enemy and imagines himself as a murderer. On the fateful day, he had done a number of things to protect the temple elephant and had visited the attic of Vasu a couple of times. But all his efforts went in vain. Even the police were not able to contain Vasu. Vasu was eager to kill the elephant as well as the citizens of Malgudi. But before Vasu could do any harm, he was killed by his own might. Rangi plays a crucial role in the whole drama. She

¹¹⁷Narayan, p. 214.

¹¹⁸ Teresa Hubel, 'Devadasi Defiance and the Man-Eater of Malgudi', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 1/ xxix (1994), 15-28 (p. 23-24).

¹¹⁹ Teresa Hubel, 'Devadasi Defiance and the Man-Eater of Malgudi', p. 26.

was adamant to save the elephant and she went to the house of Nataraj several times with a plea to save Kumar. For some strange reason, she believed in the printer and his abilities. But when the printer fails to do anything, she herself takes charge. She is an intelligent woman, and so she narrates the story on her terms. She knew Vasu very closely and was aware that he disliked mosquitoes. She narrates to Sastri that she dozed off, but far from it, as I read the text, she cleverly designs the death of Vasu, and like the Mohini of the mythical episode, leads to the destruction of the taxidermist; she takes charge and asserts in determining the course of events in Malgudi.

Rangi is the divine protector who not only saves Kumar, but also the thousands of men and women participating in the temple procession. In many ways, she is radically different from Rao's Savithri. Unlike, Savithri Rangi is uneducated, but still she strongly asserts herself against coercion and responds to ferocious Vasu with utmost intelligence. Savithri of Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* relies on Rama to set the course of her life. Hence, writing in the same period Rao and Narayan stand in sharp contrast with each other on the women's question in mid-twentieth century. Narayan willfully inverts the status of the temple dancers, providing a powerful critique of social normative tradition. While drawing a parallel between Vasu's end and the Bhasmasura myth, Keith Garebian remarks: 'When Vasu kills himself by a blow aimed at mosquitoes which have settled on his forehead the entire story loses its force and shrivels to the level of a melodramatic recreation of the Bhasmasura legend', adding further, 'It is as if Narayan felt compelled to squeeze his story into the mould pre-established by mythology'.¹²⁰ The sudden acknowledgement of the mythic connotation is significant. Narayan, indeed, compresses the story into the mythic mould to construct a folktale narrative in the written text. What is interesting, though, is the infinite complexity of the use of myth

¹²⁰ Keith Garebian, 'Strategy and Theme in the Art of R.K. Narayan', *Ariel*, 5 (1970), 70-81 (p. 70).

and the frequent subversion of the known mythical structures.¹²¹ The animals play a crucial role in the narrative, and so I will now examine the representation of the temple elephant in the novel.

Human, Animal and Divine

In South Asia, animal tales are the oldest. They are frequently used even today to impart virtues in a young child. Most of the ancient collections of oral tales, such as Buddhist *Jatak Katha* or *Pancatantra*, mostly depend on talking animals to construct the human world. The children enjoy these tales and so such stories are usually about animals who outwit their oppressor.¹²² In one such tale, narrated in *Pancatantra*, one day when a fox sees a deer, he becomes greedy to eat its flesh, but later he is killed by his own design.¹²³ At the same time, along with the human/human dyad, folktales in India also form animal/animal dyad. The tales with animal characters are particularly moral, representing the power structure within the social hierarchy. Ramanujan argues that ‘the most striking characteristics of these didactic fables are their persistent political nature’.¹²⁴ The natures of power, leadership qualities or

¹²¹ Nandini Bhattacharya, *R. K. Narayan's The Guide: New Critical Perspectives* (Delhi: Worldwide Publication, 2004), pp. 63-64.

¹²² For details on animal tales see A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Introduction’, in A.K. Ramanujan ed. *Folktales From India* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991), pp. xiii-xxxii (p. xxix).

¹²³ Vishwanath Sharma, ed., *Hitopdesha* (Hindi) (Jaipur: Hansa Prakashan, 1988), p. 8. He starts forming a friendship with him, but a crow who is also the friend of the deer warns him and advises him to keep away. But the deer refuses to do so. Once, when he is grazing, he is trapped by a hunter. The fox becomes happy to see him in such condition and refuses to rescue him. In fact, it is the fox that ensure the captivity of the deer. But soon the crow comes and asks him to lay dead. He also assures that he will keep scratching his eyes so that the hunter thinks that the deer is really dead. As soon as the hunter comes, he sees the dead deer and opens the net. The deer takes the cue from the crow and runs away. The hunter throws a big stick that eventually kills the fox.

¹²⁴ A. K. Ramanujan, ‘Introduction’, p. xxix.

betrayal are the regular themes. Most of them form what Brenda Beck calls ‘social dyads’, where one is aggressive, and the other is passive. The powerful crocodiles, tigers or black snakes do not win, and a small crow gets the King’s Servant to crush a big snake. In most of these tales the oppressor is killed by his own design. We see a similar narrative structure in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. Vasu designs to kill the temple elephant, but is killed by his own might while trying to kill a mosquito.

As we have discussed in all the preceding chapters, animals remain a significant part of the literary consciousness of the Indian authors. Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope* introduces a grandmother’s tales that has animal characters central to it to give an allegorical form to his novel. Similarly, Anand too relies on the animal world to write short stories in the form a folktale. Narayan follows this tradition. R. K. Narayan had heard various stories during his adolescence, involving transmutations between human, animal, and divine. The profession of taxidermy permits the author to develop an animal world within the ideal models of a realist fiction. Vasu, as an oppressor, occupies Mempi forest and starts killing the animals. He sells animal carcasses in the European market to gain maximum profit. He bribes the police officer, threatens Nataraj and blatantly continues his profession. Writing in the 1960s, Narayan thus metaphorically suggests Vasu as a coloniser who consciously grabs ‘other’ territories for his profit. While the imperialist writer such as, Rudyard Kipling, has used animals as a tool to establish colonial supremacy, Narayan as a postcolonial writer includes them to provide a strong protest against oppression.¹²⁵ As a matter of fact, Vasu is pitted against the animal. Barring some occasions, Vasu never harms the citizens of Malgudi. He boasts of his self control stating that he never hits any human except in self defense. It is the animals who are the victim of Vasu’s callousness. Narayan willfully pits Vasu with the

¹²⁵ Sue Walsh, *Kipling’s Children’s literature: language, identity and constructions of Childhood* (London: Routledge, 2016).

animal world as it seemed more than apt to subtly pinpoint the colonial aggression and its devastating effect on its subjects. While commenting on the absence of political reaction to the historical events, critics such as Vinay Dharwadker assumes that ‘Narayan offers the most extensive record in modern Indian fiction of ordinary life which has no need to resist colonialism strongly because it was never appropriated by colonialism’.¹²⁶ The argument of Dharwadker is debatable since Narayan often responds to the political history with such subtlety that it goes overlooked. A case in point is his elaborate representation of the temple elephant Vasu as he constructs an allegorical fiction within the constraint of a realist novel to provide an ironic commentary on the insidious effects of colonialism.

An elephant has a noteworthy position in Hindu mythology and is worshipped as Lord Ganesha. Oral stories identifying the Lord with the elephant are extremely prominent among children. Paul Courtwright explains the elevation of the elephant to godhood by referring to the great importance attached to the animal in Indian mythology, and also to the status the animal carries.¹²⁷ As proof, he quotes the association of elephant with clouds and storms, the use of the animal as a vehicle of gods and Kings, and the elephant as a symbol of fertility. Rachel Dwyer has done an interesting study of the children oral tales around the elephant godhead, Ganesha.¹²⁸ She effectively illustrates the significance of the animal in Hindu religion and mythology.

¹²⁶ Aparna and Vinay Dharwadker, ‘Language, Identity, and Nation in Postcolonial Indian English Literature’, in *English Postcoloniality: Literature from around the World* (Westport CT: Greenwood P, 1996), pp. 89-106 (p. 101).

¹²⁷ Paul B. Courtwright, ‘The Gaṇeśa festival in Maharashtra: some observation’, in Eleanor Zelliot and Maxine Bernstein, ed., *The Experience of Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 76-94.

¹²⁸ To understand the religious significance of the Elephant and the connection between an Elephant and children’s oral tale please see Rachel Dwyer, ‘Vighnaharta Shree Siddivinayak: Ganesh, Remover of Obstacles, Lord of Beginning in Mumbai’, in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 35 (2015), 263-276.



Fig 3.3 The sculpture of two Elephants at the entrance of famaous Ranganathswamy Temple, Srirangapatnam, Karnataka.
Courtesy Self

Deeply connected with the Hindu mythology, Narayan constructs the character of an elephant to form the climax of the novel. In the South Asian folklore, there is no strict demarcation between human, animal and divine.¹²⁹ Narayan similarly often juxtaposes the natural and supernatural. While doing so, he consciously deviates from the original Bhasmasura-Mohini mythic episode and rather plays the narrative in the form of a social exercise where men, women, and animal are pitted against one oppressive enemy.

The shop-keeper Muthu introduces Kumar to the narrator in the following manner:

You know we also have a temple elephant; it came years ago on its own accord from the hills, straying along with a herd of cattle returned from the hills after grazing. It was then about six months old, and was no bigger than a buffalo. We adopted it for the temple. His name is Kumar and children and elders alike adore him and feed him with coconut and sugar-cane and rice all day.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Shymala.A. Narayan, *Sudhin Ghose* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1973), p. 11.

¹³⁰ Narayan, p. 44.

The tea-retailer at Mempi slopes, while explaining the life history of Kumar, emphasises the divine presence in the form of Goddess. The animal is thus introduced as a divine messenger. The animal is cherished by the villagers and 'they love him and encourage him'. Hence, the figure of elephant acts as a counter-text to the villainy of Vasu who is selfish and derogatory. The animal transforms into a metaphor for oppression. The whole narrative is juxtaposed in a way so as to suggest a fight is between the colonial exploitation and the native resident.¹³¹ Vasu is an outsider who mischievously invades the orderly life of Malgudi, creating anxieties for its passive residents. The power and arrogance of the taxidermist is such that the inert residents of the Malgudi are unable to put any challenge in front of him. But the temple elephant of the nearby Mempi forest is pitted against Vasu to develop a rather crude moralistic commentary on colonialism and its aftermath. Narayan was writing this novel just after the end of the British rule in India, and such weaving of plot gives him enough space to pit his political ideas and a voiceless animal is deliberately pushed into the frontline to be the connoisseur of innocence and purity.

The elephant falls ill by some ugly tactic of Vasu, and Nataraj is asked to help. Nataraj visits the Veterinary doctor and requests him to go with him, but the expert declines to do so and rather encourage bringing the elephant from the Mempi village to Malgudi. The presumption that Kumar will be transported to the city causes a sensation in the village, and the village elders assemble to discuss the topic of the elephant. In between the discussion, the narrator depicts the state of the elephant kept at 'little temple' of the Goddess. Nataraj narrates: 'His trunk lay limp on the ground; his eyes looked at us without interest; his tail lay

¹³¹ Meenakshi, Mukherjee, 'Preface' to the revised edition of *Twice Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2010). It was first published in New Delhi by Arnold-Heinemann in 1971.

in the dust; his tusks seemed without lustre'.¹³² It is this centrality of the elephant in the narrative that most effectively aligns Narayan's novel with the art of folktale.

After a long discussion, it is decided that Kumar will be transported to Malgudi. Such a decision marks the beginning of a wonderful relationship between the elephant and the printer. Nataraj uses different techniques to induce the animal, and lastly, with the assistance of Mahout (elephant trainer), Nataraj convinces Kumar and takes him to the nursery of the specialist. During his recovery, Kumar transforms into Malgudi's temple elephant. He becomes the honoured participant of the temple procession organised by Nataraj to celebrate the culmination of the Poet's *Radha Kalyan* - a collection of the songs composed in praise of Radha and Krishna.¹³³

Kumar was chained to a peg at the end of the temple corridor, under a tree. A crowd of children watched him and he was briskly reducing to fibre lengths of sugar cane held out to him by children. The mahout from Top Slip was perched on his back, painting his forehead in white, red and green floral patterns; to the huge delight of the children [...] The elephant seemed to enjoy it all immensely and was in a fine mood. My heart sank at the sight of the happy animal.¹³⁴

In his preface to *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1982) Narayan argues 'Man in his smugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures may also possess ego, values, outlook, and the ability to communicate'.¹³⁵ He goes on to add that Man in hubris assumes 'that all else creation exists only for sport, amusement, comfort or nourishment'.¹³⁶ In the novel, Narayan translates the emotions of an animal through his language. The relationship between the local

¹³² Narayan, p. 123.

¹³³ An elephant is a revered character in religious folktale in South as well as North India. The Bhakti poet Surdas has composed a folk song widely popular in North India.

¹³⁴ Narayan, p. 178.

¹³⁵ R.K. Narayan, *A Tiger for Malgudi* (London: Penguin, 1982; 1984), p. 7-8.

¹³⁶ R.K. Narayan, *A Tiger for Malgudi*, p. 7-8.

children and elephant is gradually built up to provide density to the plot. The episode, though, suggests the paradox within the narrative. On one hand the white, red and green examples are being made on Kumar's brow, and the elephant is the principal highlight of the parade and enjoyment for the children. He 'was in a fine state of mind'. At the same time, Vasu is scheming to kill the lovely animal. Vasu decides to excite the elephant with a firecracker, creating mayhem that would kill and injure the people participating in the procession. Exploiting the circumstance, Vasu would shoot the elephant.

Raymond-Jean Frontain has argued that 'Narayan, a shrewd psychologist, dramatizes how Vasu's antipathy to preserving life in its natural state derives from an arrogance that allows him to envision himself as an anti-creator'.¹³⁷ Vasu, indeed, is unapologetic and considers himself to be a master-creator and challenges nature. His disregard for animal life is shown by "the stench of drying leather" that emanated from Vasu's room and soon after "disturbed the neighbourhood". His bullying nature drives him to exploit and dominate the animal. He first tries to kill Kumar by poisoning him, but when he is unsuccessful he waits for Kumar on the window of his room with a gun on his hand. When Nataraj asks him to spare the elephant he ruthlessly explains that he is a taxidermist and not a zoo-keeper. He is adamant to kill the innocent temple elephant as well as the other animals of the nearby forest.

In contrast Kumar is the symbol of innocence and purity in the novel. He is embedded within the narrative as the devotee of Vishnu; the Radha-Krishna festival and the temple procession accompanying it forms the climax of the novel. Narayan establishes the divine presence through resplendent image of Krishna (Vishnu), beautifully decorated with gold and diamonds along with his favourite Radha draped in silk and gold lace, ready to walk through

¹³⁷ Raymond-Jean Frontain, 'The Irreverence of the Comparison: R.K. Narayan's Rewriting of Sacred Narrative in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*', in Raymond-Jean Frontain and Basudeb Chakraborti ed., *A Talent for the Particular: Critical Essays on R.K. Narayan* (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2011), pp. 165-192 (p. 169).

the Malgudi. Nataraj is worried for the elephant and recalls how happy he was this morning, 'decorated, happy, and playing with the children, starting the day so well'.¹³⁸ He wants him to return to the Goddess safely, but how? He recalls an oral religious story where his elders have narrated to him that an elephant has a secured life and so he approaches Vishnu, the defender, to 'spare our elephant and spare all the blameless men and women who are pulling the chariot'. Vasu is forgiven for killing a tiger, a crow, even a sacred bird, but when in his exuberance he attempts to kill an innocent elephant along with other men, women and children, he is adequately punished. Vasu is killed by his own plan, and interestingly it is a small mosquito that is the catalyst for his destruction. Frontain rightly puts it 'for Narayan *karma* manifests itself as dramatic irony'.¹³⁹

A. K. Ramanujan in his collection of oral tales goes on to emphasise the inter-textuality of folk tales. He claims that the Hindu mythic tradition often termed as "classical tradition" and the folk tradition are transitive in nature, they respond to each other in different ways and are therefore engaged in a continuous and dialogic relations.¹⁴⁰ Oral and written, past and present, verbal and non-verbal regularly rework and redefine each other. 'Texts or tales' argues Ramanujan are therefore 'a context or pretext for other texts or tale'.¹⁴¹ For the famous folklorist, folk texts are especially pervasive, behind, under, and around all the texts of the society and in all strata not merely among the rural peasant or village artisan. In the fiction of R. K. Narayan we see the presence of a pervasive folk text guiding the narrative with the forceful evocation of traditional beliefs and local repertoire. While drawing a mythic episode that he would have heard through some story-teller, Narayan seems aware of the complexity of such use. He, therefore, consciously transforms the classical episode into a tale of Malgudi,

¹³⁸ Narayan, p. 178

¹³⁹ Raymond-Jean Frontain, 'The Irreverence of the Comparison: R.K. Narayan's Rewriting of Sacred Narrative in The Man-Eater of Malgudi', p. 173.

¹⁴⁰ Ramanujan, *Folktales From India*, p. xviii.

¹⁴¹ Ramanujan, *Folktales From India*, p. xviii.

substituting the divine figure with mundane human characters such as Nataraj and Rangi who are caught in awkward situation and are trying to get rid of a ferocious oppressor who is adamant to destroy the serenity of the small town. Narayan forms a similar inter-textual links in his short stories, but the experiment is marred by the conscious imposition of moral structure that simplifies the narrative, making it rather a dubious representation of the modern times. It is here that Narayan strongly differs from Anand.

Chapter Four

The Novels of Sudhin Ghose and the Bengal Folklore

In the novel, *The Flame of the Forest* (1955) by the Bengali novelist Sudhin Ghose, the plot suddenly grinds to a halt as narrator describes a *jatra* play being performed: ‘on the river bank itself a *jatra* show was in progress—a mystery play with songs and interludes of religious dancing’.¹⁴² The play is invoked in the novel within a complex set of events, as the narrator runs away from Calcutta to escape political imprisonment. While getting away from the conspirators, he lands at Naogaon. At the river bank, he observes a *jatra* play. The melody of the songs, accompanied by the music of cymbals, bells, gongs and a variety of drums, enralls the narrator. *Jatra* becomes a method of transformation, catapulting the protagonist into the imaginary world of a wanderer, travelling to unknown places with the group of musicians and performers. In early twentieth-century India, oral performances such as *jatra* plays and *Harikatha* were extensively drawn upon to disseminate ideas of nationalism to vast sections of non-literate or semi-literate peasants. South Asian historians such as Bipin Chandra argue that the *Swadeshi* movement in particular relied on the *jatra* performance: it was a popular method of knitting large sections of peasants into nationalist

¹⁴²Sudhin Ghose, *The Flame of the Forest* (London: Michael Joseph, 1955), p. 282. *Jatra* means procession, but in the nineteenth century it transformed into a popular performative tradition. The form developed in the sixteenth century as part of the Vaishnav devotional movement introduced by Chaitanya. During the early decades of the nineteenth century *jatra* mainly focused on religious topics but later incorporated secular themes of Vidya and Sundar. Usually, music accompanies the performance, and musical instruments include drums, cymbals, gongs and flutes. Please see Martin Barnham, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 572. Melville T. Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement: A Study of Vaishnavism of Bengal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925). Also, Sumanta Banerjee, ‘The World of Ramjan Ostagar: The Common Man of Old Calcutta’ in Sukanta Chaudhur ed., *Calcutta: A Living City* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 76-84 (p. 81).

politics.¹⁴³ Thus, Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* (1938) introduces the *Harikatha* tradition to narrate the story of Mahatma Gandhi. Rao draws on the popular oral tradition to intertwine the ideas of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement within a literary text. But the approach of Ghose is markedly different. Any such nationalist consciousness is absent in *The Flame of the Forest*—which is particularly surprising because Sudhin Ghose belonged to a renowned political family. His engagement with the idea of political nationalism is limited; in contrast to Rao, he only occasionally links orality with any form of nationalism in South Asia.¹⁴⁴ A writer *par excellence* dedicated to the art of the novel, he instead draws on the rich folk tradition of Bengal for formal and stylistic purposes: his main aim was to rejuvenate and reconceptualise the form of the novel.

In this chapter, I examine the interplay between the text and performance in two novels by Ghose, and how it helps to generate new narrative modes. I investigate the employment of *jatra*, *Kathakata* and *Halakarshan* performance, with particular reference to women, in these two novels. In addition to the performances, I also engage with the women-centric tales or sayings. These tales and rituals as we have discussed earlier constitute a distinctive arena of the women's speech in Bengal as they form part of a continuous oral tradition transmitted largely by women from one generation to another through usage in the domestic context or at women-centered ritual performances. I will examine these tales, rituals, and sayings to understand Ghose's representation of Indian femininity. But, before analyzing the author's engagement with the folklore of Bengal it is important to understand the importance of the rise of vernacular printing press in the nineteenth century Bengal.

¹⁴³Bipin Chandra, et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 131.

¹⁴⁴ His uncle, Rash Behari Ghose, was a famous moderate leader and was elected as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1907.

From Elite to Popular: Rise of “Print” in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

Bengal of the nineteenth century was the seat of growing political nationalism. The vernacular printing press and widespread printing industry gave a new impetus to the nationalist fervour. With the establishment of the first printing press in 1800, the large-scale production of journals, periodicals and pamphlets began to appear in vernacular “Bengali” language. Most of these publications though, as Anindita Ghosh has shown in her influential work *Power in Print* (2006), were caught in the debate around “high” and “low” literature.¹⁴⁵ A tendency to sanitize Bengali and make it capable of producing literature of 'high' literary worth gained momentum. The popular fiction produced out of “Battala” book market and consumed by the woman and low-caste was declared obscene.

The contempt for the popular folk traditions such as *jatra*, *panchali*, *kathakata* and so on was the by-product of colonial education. Embarrassed by the criticism of the British scholars and intellectuals, the *bhadralok* class of the nineteenth century began to look down upon these forms of entertainment. A *bhadralok* writing in 1855 complained against *jatra*, declaring that almost all the plots of *jatra* are taken from ‘amours of Krishna and Radha.’ It further goes on to add that ‘who that has any pretension to a polite taste will not be disgusted with the vulgar mode of dancing with which our play commences’.¹⁴⁶ Well known poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt even wrote a poem 'Sharmistā' in 1858 to condemn *jatra* plays. Commenting on the *bhadralok*'s disregard for the popular tradition, Rosinka Chaudhury argues that the nineteenth-century upper-middle class Bengali society was determined to construct a national literature for Bengal and poetry was to be written according to ‘pure’

¹⁴⁵ Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 47-48.

¹⁴⁶ Quoted from Sumanta Banerjee, *Parlour and the Street: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth century Bengal*, p. 159.

English literary convention.¹⁴⁷ Such an attitude, argues Chaudhury, led to the marginalization of the native tradition and declared it both ‘immodest’ (brihasunya) and ‘ugly’ (kadaraya).¹⁴⁸

Still, as Anindita Ghosh argues, huge amounts of ‘popular’ material were printed during this period. Investigating the number of popular genres printed during the period, she explains that the individual presses produced around 8000 to 47000 copies.¹⁴⁹ Works produced were mostly popular legends and romances, religious and mythological literature, almanacs, legends and romances. Ghosh claims that ‘despite *bhadralok* disapproval, these small presses did a brisk trade in light pamphlet literature, their publications enjoying a large and popular readership’.¹⁵⁰ In a way, these printed genres were the “defining others” of an emergent standardized modern Bengali language and literature. Interesting aspect of this debate between popular and vulgar was the fact that some of the educated elites, who publicly disapproved the content of these literatures, enjoyed relishing it at their home.¹⁵¹ Such tendency gave rise to huge production as well as circulation of these printed genres.

Sudhindra Nath Ghose belonged to the educated *bhadralok* class of Bengal. He must have enjoyed reading these ‘popular’ and ‘vulgar’ materials at his home. From his writings, it is, however, clear that he was very well aware of the tendency of the new Bengali class to marginalize the native tradition. Though not a nativist like Rao, Ghose through his fiction critiques *bhadralok* society for imposing Victorian morality and feudal patriarchy principles of sanity and the right code of conduct on the literature. He engages, as I will discuss further,

¹⁴⁷ See Rosinka Chaudhury, 'Reading Bharatchandra: Figuration of Language and the Figuration of Modernity in Bengal' (1822-1858)', *Intervention: Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 3 (2009), p. 316-333.

¹⁴⁸ See Rosinka Chaudhury, 'Reading Bharatchandra: Figuration of Language and the Figuration of Modernity in Bengal (1822-1858)', *Intervention: Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 3 (2009), p. 316-333.

¹⁴⁹ Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society*, p. 16.

¹⁵⁰ Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society*, p. 17.

¹⁵¹ Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society*, p. 26.

with this folk material of Bengal, frowned upon by the colonial elite, to experiment with the genre of fiction as well as to represent a new version of Indian femininity.

Early Childhood and Literary Influences

Born in 1899 in Burdwan, Sudhin Ghose was brought up in the well-known Ghose family of Bengal.¹⁵² Ghose spent his childhood in Burdwan in close association with his grandmother. In a letter written to Alis Jabana on June 9, 1952, Ghose describes his grandmother as a feisty and astute woman who knew eight different languages and often challenged the decisions of her husband.¹⁵³ Mary Weiser, an Austrian lady who stayed with Ghose for the last twenty-five years of his life, records in her unpublished memoir the relationship between Ghose and his grandmother. She narrates that, although the family was orthodox and the young Ghose was not allowed to go to the theatre, concerts or dance programmes, the grandmother sometimes sneaked the children out to see the circus.¹⁵⁴ As with Rao, it was his grandmother who introduced him to the world of oral narratives.

It was also during this time that Ghose was introduced to the rich folk tradition of Bengal. He would have learnt about *Kathakata* (story-telling), *Jatra* (folk-theatrical form) and various folk tales popular in the inner household. He would have also been exposed to several popular rituals including *halakarshan* or the ploughing ceremony that was very popular in rural Bengal. It is observed even now every August in Shantiniketan, Bolepur. Ghose also would have heard about *Vaishnav* female singers (*kirtanis*). These singers often had a unique

¹⁵² 'Papers of Sudhin Ghose', London, British Library, MSS EUR 153/62. In a letter to his French translator, Monsieur S. Jourat on January 17, 1955, Ghose writes: 'My father- Sir Bipin Behari Ghose- belonged to a patrician family of West Bengal; he was for many years a Judge in the High Court of Calcutta and the Dean of the Faculty of Law of the University of Calcutta; my mother Lady Mahila Ghose (Palit) was of Chandernagore, (until recently a French colony): her family- the Palits- was connected with Chandernagore for about three centuries'. The letter, thus confirms that Ghose belonged to the famous bhadralok community of the nineteenth-century Bengal, well-known for their cultural and political activism.

¹⁵³ Sudhin Ghose, Letter to Alis Jabana, 9th June, 1952. London, British Library, MSS EUR, 153/62.

¹⁵⁴ Mary Weiser, *Sudhin Ghose: A Memoir* (unpublished). London, British Library, MSS EUR, 153/137.

position in nineteenth-century Bengal.¹⁵⁵ In their songs, they would draw upon ancient mythical as well as contemporary episodes and would often even teach the women of andramahals (inner household) *Kathakata* or recitation of mythological stories. Swarnakumari Devi, a prominent figure of Bengal women's reforms and elder sister of the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, remembered anecdotes she had heard from such a *Kathakata Vaisnav* singer: 'A vaishnav lady-pure after a bath, dressed in white, fair-skinned-would appear in to teach. She was no mean scholar. She was well-versed in Sanskrit and needless to say in Bengali also'.¹⁵⁶ Such accounts suggest the popularity of the *Vaishnav* female singer in these elite households. The young Ghose might have known such performances during his childhood.

Ghose subsequently moved to Calcutta where he started studying science at Presidency College. He later sailed to Britain and then to France in 1920-21 for his higher education. Ghose spent his time in London, Paris and Strasbourg as a Research Scholar, finishing his research on Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Later, he went on to become a journalist, widely travelling across the whole world, except South America.¹⁵⁷ After several journalistic stints, Ghose joined the League of Nations secretariat in 1929. He worked in its information section for about a decade. During the period, he also did a lot of writing and translation. Ghose went back to India in 1940, but soon returned to London and was with the allied forces until 1945. Meanwhile, his connection with his homeland was limited to a handful of letters from

¹⁵⁵ Please see Sumanta Banerjee, 'Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid ed., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 127-77.

¹⁵⁶ See Swarnakumari Devi's article on education in the *Andramahal* in Pradeep c. 1899 (Bhadra 3.5 1306), quoted in Brojen Bandopadhyay, *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmala*, No. 28 (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1948). Cited in Sumanta Banerjee, 'Women in Popular Culture', p.151.

¹⁵⁷ London, British Library, MSS EUR F 153/137.

his brothers and close friends.¹⁵⁸ Ghose remained in London for the last twenty-five years of his life teaching the history of Arts and Philosophy. He died in 1965.

Ghose's varied literary output includes some journalistic writing, a study entitled *Post-War Europe: 1918-1937* (1939), and three volumes of folktales collected from the Indian subcontinent. His first novel, *And Gazelles Leaping*, appeared in 1949 in London. It was followed by *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951), *The Vermillion Boat* (1953) and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955). The novels are written in the style of a *bildungsroman*, tracing the journey of the narrator in a remote village as well as metropolitan Calcutta. Sudhin Ghose also had a rather bitter relationship with his publisher Michael Joseph.¹⁵⁹ The novels, though, are distinct, and Ghose's novelistic career in Europe coincided with the rise of modernism. One of the strands within modernism was the radical reconceptualisation of European literature and art through engagement with more 'primitive' cultures and civilisations, with a distinct ethnological slant.¹⁶⁰ Sexuality and black culture held a privileged place in modernist and avant-garde art, from Pablo Picasso to Gertrude Stein. Inspired by African art, Picasso in "Les Femmes d'Alger" famously experimented with Cubism, turning the shapes and faces of a group of posing prostitutes into fragmented figures.¹⁶¹ In India, too, we see the influence of the avant-garde movement on the artists and writers of the period. The painters, such as Jamini Roy, Amrita Sherghill and Rabindranath Tagore, drew upon the so-called

¹⁵⁸His initial estrangement with the family began in 1920 when he decided to pursue literature instead of Science. His father, Bipin Behari Ghose wanted him to be a doctor and Ghose was sent to England to study Science. Ghose, however, decided to study English Literature. He subsequently, much to his father's distress, married a French woman, Yvonne Lolita.

¹⁵⁹The relationship was so bitter that Ghose was unable to publish all his novels in India. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to highlight rather vicious feud between Michael Joseph and Sudhin Ghose. For More see Sudhin Ghose papers housed at the British Library.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Bell, 'The Metaphysics of Modernism', in Michael Levenson ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 9-32 (p. 20).

¹⁶¹ Leah, Rosenberg, 'Caribbean Models for Modernism in the work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys', *Modernism/Modernity*, 4 (2004), 219-38 (p. 220).

primitive images to construct their genealogy of modernity.¹⁶² The hitherto little-known archive of Sudhin Ghose in the British Library, comprising largely letters, provides fresh insights into his art. In his writing, he heavily draws upon these new literary trends, as evident in this letter sent to Madame Irène Jaccard in 1955:

I have started a new book. But the progress has been extremely slow. This sort of a snail's gait is due to my failure to discover an Indian myth to illustrate my theme. (In *Gazelles* there was Urvasi and The Thunder; in *Cradle of the Clouds* the story of Balaram; in *The Vermillion Boat* the legend of Chand Sagar and the Goddess Uma, etc., in *The Flame of the Forest*, I have Radha and Krishna). But now, I do not know what to utilise for my new book. Of course, I am definitely opposed to anything well known. I am an original and I must have an almost unknown or a complicated theme for my purpose.¹⁶³

Ghose in this letter explains his deep engagement with mythic tales. But what is interesting is the continuous adaptation and transformation of particular mythic episodes in the novels as well as his sustained use of obscure myths in his fiction. Ghose often relies on folk myth for both Radha-Krishna and the legend of Chandsagar forms the large repertoire of Bengal folklore. He produces a new form of modernism by invoking the rural myths of Bengal. While Rao uses myths to establish traditional image of woman; Ghose's portrayal of women's sexuality in particular produces a counter to the image of women produced during the reform movement as well as the subsequent nationalist period. It is within these contexts that I will examine the two novels of Ghose. I will first examine the conflation of text and performance in the selected texts and then go on to discuss the deep engagement of Ghose with the women-centric folklore.

¹⁶² Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: Indian artists and the avant-garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion, 2007), p. 66.

¹⁶³ Sudhin Ghose Letter to Madame Irène Jaccard dated 22nd October, 1955. London, British Library, MSS EUR F 153/46.

Text and Performance: *Kathakata* tradition in the novels of Ghose

Kathakata is a conventional form of recital of Puranic tales accompanied by singing and theatrical performance, often carried out for several days during festivals. During the nineteenth century, it found a new textual medium in printed books.¹⁶⁴ Readers (*Kathaks* or Pundits) were hired to recite or chant certain works; a large number of people who could not read would gather to listen to those who could. Ghose engages with the *Kathakatha* tradition in *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951) and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955).¹⁶⁵ In the former, the recital becomes a method of critiquing colonial hegemonic apparatus, whereas, in the latter, it turns to a metaphor for the love relationship. It is this employment of the popular performative tradition of Bengal that this section proposes to examine.

Cradle of the Clouds is set in a remote Santal village in the (now) Jharkhand state of India. The novel begins with the farewell ceremony of the narrator as he is leaving the village to pursue higher education in Calcutta. Every face relapses into a recollection, where the narrator nostalgically recounts their tales and his experiences in a flash-back mode. The scanty rainfall and a ritual performed to bring rain holds the plot together. The narrator, in a flash-back mode, recalls his participation in the ploughing ritual ceremony. Numerous tales, myths, legends, songs and sayings are included in the novel to construct a village world. Commenting on the form of the novel, Shymala A. Narayan rightly argues that, just like the

¹⁶⁴Tapti Ray, 'Disciplining the Printed Text: Colonialist and Nationalist Surveillance of Bengali text', in Partha Chatterjee ed., *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 30-62 (p. 46).

¹⁶⁵The cultural events like a *jatra* performance, or a *Kathakata* recitation from religious scriptures was very popular in nineteenth century Bengal and drew members of all the communities.

novels of Raja Rao, the novels of Ghose are constructed with a series of small tales connected to the main narrative as “a pearl on a string”.¹⁶⁶

While studying a north Indian village, the anthropologist Susan Wadley observes that, even after increasing literacy and the greater availability of written works, the oral tradition held sway.¹⁶⁷ She further adds, ‘everyone knows at least a few songs, and many know a great number. Both men and women are renowned for their story-telling’.¹⁶⁸ Ghose’s village in *Cradle of the Clouds* is similarly populated with multiple story-tellers and folk singers. The narrator introduces numerous stories or *kathas* to his readers, intertwining the main narrative with popular oral tales. Ghose introduces two rival story-tellers of the village—*Bhat* and *Kathak*. Traditionally *Kathak* tells the prose narrative whereas *Bhat* sings poetry. While the themes of the poet are religious, *Kathak* narrates stories of various types—humorous, religious or secular. The two figures relate to the different types of oral tradition popular in the villages of Bengal. Also, there are several characters—Kumar, Punditji, Mashi-ma, Para Manik—who are also story-tellers.

The novel opens with a classic story-telling episode. The whole village has gathered at the village square to bid adieu to the narrator who is moving to the metropolis with a scholarship. The villagers, as well as the Santal from the neighbouring hill, are enthusiastic about his success, and they feel ‘proud of his achievement’. Various story-tellers and folk singers entertain the crowd. Amidst the farewell ceremony of the narrator, Punditji narrates a tale to critique Thomas Babington Macaulay:

‘Take Makolee Sahib for example,’ the Punditji said as he took his seat in the midst of the group clustered in the shade of the two-century old *peepul*. The men squatted

¹⁶⁶ Shymala.A. Narayan, *Sudhin Ghose*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁷ Susan Wadley, *Essays On North Indian Folk Tradition* (New Delhi: Chronicle Books, 2005), p. 95.

¹⁶⁸ Susan Wadley, *Essays On North Indian Folk Tradition*, p. 98.

crosslegged on the stone dias round the base of the tree. The women formed a knot on their own; they sat apart, nestling together. ‘Take him as an example,’ the Punditji repeated and the men nodded as though Makolee Sahib was their common acquaintance. ‘Who could be more arrogant? Makolee Sahib was stiff-necked, close-fisted, and argumentative.’

[...] Kathak the professional storyteller and the scribe of the village took up the cue. His twice-told tales were stale. Nevertheless his rural listeners loved them: they were never tired of hearing the same story recounted twenty times.

Once Makolee Sahib took this expert in Mathematics with him to a playhouse, and the Jung-i-Lat Wellesley Sahib, better known as Wellington, happened to be entering the place at the same moment by another door. The aged veteran was recognized, and the house testified their respect by loud ovation. At this Makolee Sahib’s friend bowed low and murmured, ‘Well, well, Makolee! This is more than I expected. I rarely visit a playhouse. How is it possible that these good people should already have discovered that I am here?’

‘Makolee Sahib was so hurt,’ Kathak concluded, ‘that after that he never put his foot inside that theatre, nor spoke to his friend.’¹⁶⁹

In the above passage, Ghose introduces his readers to *Kathakata*.¹⁷⁰ The villagers, as well as Santals, are shown grouped together, sitting cross-legged under an old tree, listening to

¹⁶⁹ Sudhin Ghose, *Cradle of the Clouds* (London: Michael Josephs, 1951), p. 13-14.

¹⁷⁰ Please see Ashutosh Bhattacharya, ‘Oral Tradition of *Rāmāyana* in Bengal’ in V. Raghvan ed., *The Rāmāyana Tradition in Asia* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980), p. 596. The oral transmission of epic and Puranas are referred to as *kathakata*. But as many historians have shown the *kathak* or storytellers may have their own versions of the mythic episodes or may create completely new tales by using epic characters, metaphors and symbols. See Francesca Orsini, ‘Texts and Tellings: Kathas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries’ in Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butter Schofield ed., *Tellings*

tales narrated by Punditji as well as a *Kathak*. The tales of Punditji elaborate the grim philosophical and metaphysical theories, very similar to the tales of *Kathak*, the professional story-teller. But Punditji replaces the mythological episodes with contemporary history. The literal subversion of the name Macaulay to Makolee satirises the colonial hegemonic apparatus. The humorous alteration of the name itself marks a significant moment in colonial discourse, where an unnamed Pundit, sitting at a village, is challenging the colonial worldview that considered indigenous knowledge useless and insignificant. One could easily mark the subtle sarcasm in phrases such as 'Makolee Sahib was stiff-necked'. Punditji thus plays to the nationalist imagination and acts as indigenist in reversing colonial charges of having an 'inferior' civilization. If, according to T. J. Abraham, Ghose created Punditji as “an archetypal semi-devine personality”, he is also an anti-colonial nationalist, an instrument of satire and critique as Ghose shows how the nationalist movement has percolated into the realm of oral culture.¹⁷¹ Thus both Rao and Ghose appropriate the *Katha* telling to voice their protest against the colonial hegemony. While Rao's Harikatha-man turns Gandhi into a divine force to create a mesmerizing effect on the masses, Ghose intelligently brings in Punditji to ridicule British policies against its subject. In both the cases orality becomes the most suitable medium for expression in a written text.

Thomas Babington Macaulay introduced his famous Minutes in 1835, in favour of English education in India. His aim to create a dream-generation of men 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' was a pivotal and famously controversial moment in the history of colonial education in India.¹⁷² Before

and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), pp. 327-58 (p. 328).

¹⁷¹ T.J. Abraham, *A Critical Study of Novels of Arun Joshi, Raja Rao, and Sudhin Ghose* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publisher & Distributors, 1999), p. 97.

¹⁷² English Education Act of 1835 introduced by Thomas Babington Macaulay in the British Parliament.

Macaulay, it was James Mill and his utilitarianism that sought for a more moral and virtuous learning for Indian men.¹⁷³ Discarding the Orientalists such as Warren Hastings and his effort to bring out the best of classical Indian literature, Mill evaluated art on the basis of utility. Mill also rejected the claims of William Morris who had hailed Kalidas as the Shakespeare of India, stating that Morris had succumbed to the ‘seductive pleasures of the literary genres’.¹⁷⁴ Macaulay’s infamous intervention, in many ways, marks the culmination of this racist dismissal of indigenous literature. Ghose, through the oral recitation of the legends of Macaulay, mocks him and his policies for India, giving us an example of anti-colonial subversion ‘from below’. Francesca Orsini argues that oral story-tellers, such as Pundits in the North Indian region, combine and blend instruction with entertainment.¹⁷⁵ In many cases, situations that specifically deal with spiritual, philosophical or technical knowledge (*gyana*) are interspersed with a comic undertone.¹⁷⁶ While drawing on the oral narrative style, Ghose similarly mixes humour within intellectual discussions to draw in the ordinary listener. Also, in oral narration, the mood of the audience is an important ingredient, and a teller often has to combine different emotions to create the required effect. As Orsini points out, ‘each tale modulates and combines registers of instruction and entertainment through humorous subversive situations, vivid dialogues, emotional scenes, displays of technical knowledge’ to blur the lines between “entertaining” and “enlightening”.¹⁷⁷ In the above passage, Punditji similarly combines entertainment with education to “entertain” as well as to “enlighten”.

The *Kathak*, however, has his own repertoire of stories which are comical and rarely translate into the serious intellectual debates. Even when his tales are twice-told and stale,

¹⁷³ See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989)

¹⁷⁴ Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India*, p. 121.

¹⁷⁵ Francesca Orsini, ‘Texts and Tellings: Kathas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries’, p. 328.

¹⁷⁶ Francesca Orsini, ‘Texts and Tellings: Kathas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries’, p. 328.

¹⁷⁷ Francesca Orsini, ‘Texts and Tellings: Kathas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries’, p. 332.

villagers love to listen to them. *Kathak* takes the cue from Punditji to narrate an encounter between Makolee Sahib and Wellesley Sahib. The whole story illustrates the glory of Wellesley Sahib and how such reverence for Wellsely Sahib hurt Macaulay, who was also his friend. Ghose here clearly aligns himself with Orientalists who sought out the classical Sanskrit and Persian literature. In sharp contrast to Macaulay, his predecessors such as Warren Hastings (1812-1823) and Lord Wellesley (1798-1805) are shown to be revered by the audience. The scribe narrates how when Wellesley Sahib entered the door of a theatre 'the house testified their respect by a loud ovation'.¹⁷⁸ But when Macaulay enters the same room, the audience remains seated and displays no reverence. Punditji here consciously contrasts the two well-known colonial figures of Bengal and in doing so he performs the nationalist act of appropriating the orientalist imagination of India's past to construct a counter-discourse. If Orientalists valorised India's past to point out its present degeneration, a number of nationalists appropriated and adapted the orientalist discourse for a variety of political persuasions, with 'an ideological frame for crafting their counter-discourses'.¹⁷⁹ Thus, as political theorists such as Partha Chatterjee have powerfully argued, many of the anti-colonial nationalists, while retaining the orientalist imagination of India's past, inverted the Orientalist problematic of the civilization in decline.¹⁸⁰ Ghose's Punditji can be aligned to some of these nationalists for whom the greatness and purity of India's past was unaltered by colonial hybridity. While valorising traditional knowledge, Ghose, however, also represents the indigenous collaborators of Macaulay's system of education. Babu Hemchandra (a minor character) praises Macaulay and considers traditional knowledge insignificant. Similarly, in his lectures at Calcutta University, later published as *Post-War Europe*, Ghose echoes the multiplicity of

¹⁷⁸Ghose, *Cradle of the Clouds* (London: Michael Joseph, 1951), p. 14.

¹⁷⁹ Janet O'Shea, 'Serving Two Masters? Bharatnatyam and Tamil Cultural Production' in Indira Viswanathan Peterson & Dवेश Soneji ed., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 165-93 (p. 169).

¹⁸⁰ See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

opinions and claims that no attempt has been made to analyse the “How” and “Why” of the trend of events, nor furnish a thorough-going critique of the doctrines and political tenets.¹⁸¹ Similarly, in the novel, Ghose introduces multiple perspectives on modernization and traditional knowledge. The narrator as a mouthpiece remains neutral. Even after taking part in the oral narration, he moves forward for higher education in Calcutta.

The *Kathakata* in *The Flame of the Forest* (1955) has a different function. The novel was published in 1955 in London. The novel records the experiences of an unemployed young man in the metropolis. The plot deals with the relationship between the narrator and a devotional singer, Myna. While travelling to the house of Diwan Nishikant, the narrator encounters Myna. The sight of a nautch girl with cheap jewellery creates many misgivings, forcing the narrator to dismiss her presence. The novel narrates the formation of a relationship between the two characters, constructing multiple paradoxes within the narrative. At the same time, there are oral tales embedded in the novel to satirise the growing political corruption in the new nation-state. Ghose, here, no longer draws on rural myth and folklore to suggest a sense of village community; instead, the whole narrative is interspersed with oral tales, songs and sayings popular in the nineteenth-century Calcutta.

The novel begins with the meeting of the two lovers - the narrator and Myna. In their first meeting, the narrator shows distrust for the singer and her uncle. He calls her ‘frightening’, often demeaning her through various sultry remarks. The singer, Myna, however, shows a sense of reverence, declaring him a scholar and a man with a heart of gold. The narrator had once saved her uncle; therefore, she was grateful to see him. When, during the course of arguments, the narrator offers Myna money, she retorts by saying, ‘it would be a crime to accept money from you’. To show her devotion, she bends down to touch his feet. Her

¹⁸¹ Sudhin Ghose, Preface to *Post-War Europe: 1918-1937* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1939).

gesture intrigues the narrator, making him puzzled about this unexpected reverence. He tries to move away, but Myna pleads with him to listen to her song. T.J. Abraham concludes, Myna's warm and affectionate invitation to Balaram 'is a proposal to partake of Myna's blessedness and felicity'.¹⁸²

The narrator, though, is in a hurry. He has come to Bow Bazaar to meet Diwan Nishikant, his would-be employer. He requests that the singer and the musician let him go: 'you have brought a crowd along with you. They want to hear your stories. Just now I am in hurry'.¹⁸³ The singer then accompanies him to the house of Diwan and asks him to visit the *Kalighat* shrine to listen to her musical performance. At last, with much restraint, the narrator arrives at the place. Ghose, here, invokes tales and songs popular in the Bengal *Vaishnav* tradition metaphorically to synthesise the romance between the two characters.¹⁸⁴

Figure 2.1 Courtesy: Ashmolean Library, University of Oxford. Scenes of Krishna, Radha, and her companion, and the poet Jayadeva (active 12th century) Artist Sahibdin (active 1628-1655) *Image removed due to 3rd Party Copyright*

¹⁸² T. J. Abraham, *A Critical Study of Novels of Arun Joshi, Raja Rao, and Sudhin Ghose*, p. 116.

¹⁸³ Sudhin, *The Flame of the Forest* (London: Michael Joseph, 1955), p. 43.

¹⁸⁴ In a letter to his friend, Ghose acknowledges that the novel is based on Radha-Krishna myth. Sudhin Ghose, letter to Madame Irène Jaccard, dated 22nd October 1955. London, British Library, MSS Eur F 153/46.

The romantic plot between the narrator (hereafter Balaram) and Myna evolves through the elaborate staging and singing of the Radhakrishna story:

‘I want him,’ Radha whispered to her companions. I am love-lorn. I am dying for him. Yet I want him not if he does not desire me. Therefore, I have hidden myself in this secret grove. Let him seek and find me. Radha’s cheeks were wet with tears. Radha sobbed, ‘I am unhappy. What shall I do if he tries to find me and fails to discover my hiding place? I cannot live without him. Yet how can I humble myself.’

Radha’s tongue uttered what her heart desired but reason disavowed:

‘Go to him- win him hither- whisper low
How he may find me if he searches well;
Say, if he will, joys past his hopes to know
Await him here; go now to him and tell
where Radha is, and that hence she charms
His spirit to her arms.’

[...] Meanwhile Krishna himself was in quest of Radha, he too did not know if his beloved Radha wanted him or not. Where was she? Where was she hiding herself? Was it because he was unworthy of her love? Perhaps she was ashamed of his profession of a cowherd?’¹⁸⁵

The oral recitation of a text is all pervasive in Bengal folk tradition. Melville T.Kennedy records the presence of the *Kathaks* or oral performers in nineteenth century Bengal.¹⁸⁶ Drawing on the popular performative tradition, Ghose constructs the character of Myna. She performs the popular *Gita Govinda* text to enchant her audience with a moving, romantic

¹⁸⁵ Ghose, p. 94.

¹⁸⁶ Melville T.Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement: A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 83-4.

tale.¹⁸⁷ She produces Radha's longing through various phrases: 'I want him', 'I am dying for him'. Ghose shows her singing and quoting Jaideva's lines to add musical cadence to the prose narration. The inclusion of the song enhances and intensifies the performance. The narration also domesticates Krishna as a cowherd, experiencing worldly woes.

Speaking about textual performance in a North Indian context, Philip Lutengendorf has successfully shown the multiplicity of performance practices that have grown around Tulsi's *Ramayana*. He outlines the complementarities between the text and its exposition, the knowledge of the teller as well as the listeners and the manner in which a performer combines knowledge, devotion, emotion and entertainment in performance.¹⁸⁸ Lutengendorf further goes on to point out that in a *Katha* exposition, 'the medium is artful language, but its essence is emotional communication'.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, a trained teller always generates multiple *rasas* or literary taste through his or her language. Myna, as a performer, uniquely extrapolates the agonies, fantasies and erotics in the Radha-Krishna relationship.

A song takes after the prose narrative:

Krishna talks to his flute, and receives the response, 'Breathe into me, Lord! Caress me with your lips.' At the touch of his lips the reed instrument sings. Its sad strains complain of Radha's absence and Krishna's sad plight.

If I were a bulbul, a trilling bulbul, my Radha!
I would stray wherever you pray
To chant your sacred echo.

¹⁸⁷Jayadeva, through this text in the twelfth century, valorised a new form of religious practice—*Vaishnavism*. It moved far from the orthodox brahminical system and introduced Krishna, its hero, as a humble cowherd. The text mainly manages the union and separation of Radha and Krishna. Krishna longs to meet Radha and, henceforth, she gets to be the key to the Krishna devotion.

¹⁸⁸Philip Lutengendorf has enumerated the art of story-telling during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He explains that the venue for such performance was usually a public place. The speaker occupied a raised seat and read a manuscript from the printed text. But his or her performance was not strictly confined to the words of the text or even the story it told. He could elaborate or digress any line of it and the extent and ingenuity of his improvisation was limited only by his knowledge and training.

¹⁸⁹Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidasa*, p. 242.

If I were a bee, a humming bee, my Radha!
I would fly wherever you hie
To chase your scented shadow.¹⁹⁰

While illustrating the public rendering of the mythical tales, A.K. Ramanujan has argued how various songs, musical instruments and props were included in the telling of mythic episodes to embellish a performance.¹⁹¹ Ghose here tries to enact the musical cadences of song through the alliteration of 'b' and the internal rhyming in 'stray' and 'pray'. The singer describes the plight of Krishna, who is love-lorn and is singing that if Krishna would have been a 'trilling bulbul', he would have followed her and would have chased Radha's 'scented shadow'. The metaphors invoked in the song are erotic since bulbul and bee are sexual symbols in devotional poetry. The song then becomes the metaphor for passionate love. Ghose thus includes an oral performance to create his version of romantic love, transgressing the traditional boundaries of love and marriage. He falls back on the much-venerated and familiar story of Radha and Krishna to add symbolic and affective depth as well as to emotionally legitimise an otherwise transgressive liaison between a nautch-girl and a Bengali Babu.

The Krishna symbol in devotional literature is associated with play, desire and fantasies. Two well-known South Asian women poets similarly draw on the image to create their versions of love. Sarojini Naidu (whom Ghose quotes randomly) and Kamala Das have drawn on the figure of Krishna to write poems about of love and union. However, Fritz Blackwell argues 'they both have employed the motif in their poetries with startlingly different attitudes and results'.¹⁹² For Naidu, the love between Radha-Krishna is devotional;

¹⁹⁰Ghose, p. 95.

¹⁹¹ A.K. Ramanujan, 'Two Realms of Kannada Folklore', p. 43-4.

¹⁹²Fritz Blackwell, 'Krishna Motifs in the poetry of Sarojini Naidu and Kamala Das', in *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 13 (1977), 9-14 (p. 11).

whereas for Das, it is sensual.¹⁹³ In Ghose, we see the confluence of both these imaginaries. Radha in Ghose is not only spiritual but is also amorous. Ghose combines the divine and mundane to construct the character of Myna who, as *abhisarika*, represents the highest form of female love.¹⁹⁴ The narrator, on the other hand, turns into Krishna when, finally, he accepts to play flute in the troupe of Myna.

Every oral performer has her method of telling, and the *Katha* exposition has changed with time. In his *Life of a Text*, Philip Lutengendorf argues that ‘there is a wide variation in the style of the individual performers’.¹⁹⁵ It has changed during the last decades and rightly continues to transform itself with the changing audience. During the nineteenth century, the style and technique were ‘the sequential narration in daily installments of parts or the entire epic’.¹⁹⁶ A temple was the best place of performance and the time used to shift between afternoon and midnight. The performer had a raised seat from where they performed the text, often interplaying prose with poetry. A teller, as Lutengendorf argues, ‘was not strictly confined to the words of the text or even to the story it told’.¹⁹⁷ They were free to digress or elaborate the narrative according to individual interpretation. The landlords usually patronised these artists, and they were paid nominally for their performance.

What is remarkable in Ghose’s adaptation is the true representation of the performative tradition. In the novel, Diwan Nishikant, a landlord, is the patron of Myna. He even comes to her telling. Myna, like the early exponents, narrates the episodes of the *Krishna Lila* in a sequential manner. In Kolkata, the famous *Kalighat* temple is the venue, and the performer

¹⁹³ Kamala Das, *The Descendants* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1967; 1991).

¹⁹⁴ Abhisarika is the woman who braves all difficult elements such as blankness of night to meet her lover. It is also another name of Radha for she shows similar devotion in her relationship with Krishna.

¹⁹⁵ Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 157.

¹⁹⁶ Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 157.

¹⁹⁷ Philip Lutengendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 157. Among the early nineteenth century oral performers, the most famous was Baijnath Kurmi (c. 1833-85). He was a connoisseur of poetry and the author of a commentary on the poetic treatise *Kāvyaakalpadruma*.

has a raised seat from where she expounds the text. Myna combines poetry and prose to evoke the enchanting effect of *Katha* performance, producing the new strand of narration in a written text. She digresses or elaborates the episodes according to her interpretation. While commenting on the influence of the religious exposition on the Bengali masses in the nineteenth century, Dinesh Chandra Sen calls *Kathakata* performers born story-tellers ‘who would brilliantly couple prose with poetry’.¹⁹⁸ He further goes on to record:

It is impossible to exaggerate the great influence they wield over the masses ... The Kathakas of the old school were scholars, poets and finished singers. The effect which their narration produced was wonderful. Born story-tellers as they were, their oration was coupled with the power of music, the effect of all of which was heightened by the command over language and their great scholarship.¹⁹⁹

Balaram narrates the effect of Myna's performance in the following manner:

Myna's soprano voice was like that of a song-bird in ecstasy, pouring its heart out in melodious notes. And the words of her chant! They were as exquisite as her voice. She recounted Radha's story in songs and dances to the enthralled listeners: they sat cross-legged in serried circles round her in the stone-paved courtyard of the Kala Bhairab sanctuary.

[...] The listeners sat in respectful silence, carefully attending to every word that came from Myna's lips, to the minutest modulation of her voice, and to her slightest gesture.

¹⁹⁸Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1911), p. 585-90.

¹⁹⁹ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, p. 585-90.

They listened with such rapt attention that a stranger, were he there, would have thought that a new mystery was being revealed by a sibyl to a hypnotized throng.²⁰⁰

The performer, Myna, narrates the legends of Radha through songs and dances, enthralling the listeners through her soprano voice, which was like ‘that of a song-bird in ecstasy’. The narrator is enchanted, and he compares her to the ‘sibyls’—the divine messenger in Greek mythology. Swarnakumari Devi, in her reminiscence, similarly recounts the performance of a Vaishnav singer: ‘She had a wonderful power of describing, and impressed everyone with her performance’, adding that ‘even those who were not in the least interested in learning, used to gather at the reading room to listen to the *Vaishnav* lady’s description of the dawn, of gods and goddess’.²⁰¹ The representation of the female singer in the novel resonates with Swarnakumari Devi’s description.

One reason for the appeal of the performance is the language of the *bhakti* poetry, which is grounded in the everyday, familiar language of the ordinary people.²⁰² They strike an easy chord with the audience because their production is oriented towards the agricultural, pastoral and artisanal world. For instance, Myna, in her performance, shows Radha weeping and her ‘cheeks are wet with tears’. She is unhappy for she is love-lorn; whereas Krishna is referred to as a cowherd, singing the song in praise of Radha. Hence, in these performances, the mythical Lords are domesticated and mixed into a folk milieu. Later, Myna leaves Calcutta, and the narrator assumes the role of the story-teller. He recounts varieties of tales to entertain as well as enlighten his audience:

²⁰⁰ Ghose, p. 93.

²⁰¹ See Swarnakumari Devi’s article on education in the *Andramahal* in *Pradeep* c. 1899 (Bhadra 3.5 1306) quoted in Brojen Bandopadhyay, *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmala* No. 28 (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1948). Cited in Sumanta Banerjee, ‘Women in Popular Culture’, p. 151.

²⁰² Rekha Pande, *Divine Sounds from the Heart-Singing Unfettered in their own Voices* (New Castle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), p. 151.

I began with a short prayer and read out the text, stanza by stanza, interpolating the Sanskrit text with my translation and commentary.

One day Gautama came across a baby elephant that had lost its mother and was most disconsolate. The sage took pity on it and brought it with him to his hermitage. And there he nursed it and reared it till it grew to be large and mighty.

[...] Now Indra, the Lord of the Firmament, decided to test the affection the sage bore to the elephant, and taking the form of a despot known as the Iron-handed, abducted the animal.

‘Would you not care to part with it for a hundred measures of gold, or a hundred handmaidens, or a hundred head of cattle?’

‘You are certainly generous,’ replied the sage. ‘But what shall I do with what you offer? I reckon wisdom alone is my wealth, and my needs are those of a temperate man. I cannot barter the friendship of this animal for gold, or for women, or for kine.’²⁰³

The story that the narrator tells is very different from that of Myna. The *katha* of Gautam is drawn from the classical sources. The story opens in a classic folk tale style as in ‘One day Gautam’ through a pattern of repetition (‘a hundred measures...’, ‘a hundred handmaidens’, ‘a hundred head’). The whole story describes the ordeal of the sage Gautam and his love for the baby elephant. The hermit in the tale denies bartering the elephant for the sake of gold, women or kine. Indra tests him and, in the end, gives him a place in the seventh heaven. The *katha* has a *phalasruti* (statement of purpose) significance and anybody who reads, or recounts the tale ‘with due understanding shall reach the same goal’.²⁰⁴ While exploring the *katha* performances, Francesca Orsini comments on the inter-textuality of the characters. She

²⁰³ Ghose, p. 161.

²⁰⁴ Ghose, p. 163.

argues that ‘the inter-textual reference to different characters was one of the skills that story-tellers displayed in performance possibly through the digression’.²⁰⁵ Such inter-textual references, as Orsini argues, are based on the assumption that the audience is familiar with them. The narrator as an oral performer uses similar techniques, bringing several well-known characters such as Gautum and Indra to entertain his audience.²⁰⁶ But what is interesting is the reversal of point of view. A. K. Ramanujan has shown how the point of view changes between a male and a female performer.²⁰⁷ According to certain gendered conventions, when a male narrator tells his tales, it is quite factual whereas when a female narrates a tale, it is replete with imagery and metaphors. Hence, when Myna performs the text, her interpretation is emotive, and erupts through rich domestic metaphors such as ‘cowherd’. But when the narrator performs the text, he narrates it directly, often inhibiting his emotions. Ghose too follows these gendered modes of narration. Thus far, I have examined the *kathakata* tradition; I will now go on to discuss the co-relation between women and folklore, particularly in Bengal, and the manner in which Ghose employs folklore to represent his version of Indian womanhood.

Women and folklore in the novels of Ghose

A folk song (*kheud*) of the nineteenth century represents the amorous relationship between Radha and Krishna in the following manner:

Orey āmār kālo Bhramar
 Madhu lutbi Jodi āye
 Come hither, my black bee,

²⁰⁵ Orsini, ‘Texts and Tellings: Kathas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries’, p. 333.

²⁰⁶ We find frequent references to Indra and Guatum in *Ramayana*, *Mahabharat* and other Puranic texts. Indra is depicted as the lord of heaven and Gautum is a pious sage.

²⁰⁷ Please see A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Toward a Counter-System: Women’s Tales’, p. 33-55.

If you want to feast on my honey!²⁰⁸

The directness of the language, as in 'come here, my black bee', shows the boldness of the genre. Radha was married to Ayan Ghosh, yet transgressing the traditional social standards she goes out to meet Krishna. She resists her husband and breaks away from the patriarchal standards for her beloved. The folk artists draw on this feeling and build an open show of desire, as in 'if you want to feast on my honey'. As Tanika Sarkar has noted, 'proverbs in Bengal are a unique domain that reflects hard contempt for patriarchal orders', adding that 'while lullabies, another form of female orality emulate benign female subjectivity, proverbs critique the secluded world of the women'.²⁰⁹ These tellings, songs and performances joined the women of each social group into proximity in the nineteenth century. Sumanta Banerjee contends that such oral narratives not only provided a space for these women from the conventional patriarchal structures but also from the 'traditional fear of power wielded by men'.²¹⁰ For example, the above cited *khued* song ridicules male prevalence in a merry, ribald manner. In the traditional world view, a married woman is not allowed to form polygamous relationships, but defying that, Radha goes out to meet Krishna whenever she hears his flute. Her husband and in-laws are miffed but she remains unaffected. The Panchali—a type of folk song famous in Bengal—utilizes a similar strategy to critique patriarchy:

They all fell in love (legendary women of the Hindu mythology) and got the name of Sati
(chaste)
With ease they earned both virtue and wealth as well as love.
But when we fall in love, there's
Endless anguish for us. We can't
Bear it anymore. What else can we say.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Quoted from Sumanta Banerjee, 'Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', p. 137.

²⁰⁹ Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban! A Modern Autobiography* (Kali for Women: New Delhi, 1999), p. 6.

²¹⁰ Quoted from Sumanta Banerjee, 'Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', p. 137.

²¹¹ Sumanta Banerjee, 'Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', p. 135.

Such women-centric folklore in the nineteenth century gave women a space to construct a "counter-framework" to set up codes and practices. However, towards the mid-twentieth century, some bhadralok men started to critique these folkloric forms. Hur Chunder Dutt commented, 'hundreds might be seen keeping up the entire evenings to see and listen to the amours of lecherous Krishna and the delightful shepherdess Radha'.²¹² With the rise of the anti-nautch movement in the 1890s, the colonial government, later on, went on banning the women-centric performances as well as the women entertainers in Bengal. Puritan colonial-nationalist ideas about female sexuality played a central role in the criminalization of women singers and their songs.

Ghose's depiction of Myna is also partly in response, or as reaction against, more conventional versions of Indian femininity, going back to the nineteenth century and becoming increasingly prominent in the early twentieth. In Bengal, questions around women's condition remained a fundamental part of the reformist and nationalist discourse. From Raja Ram Mohun Roy's crusade against *sati*, to Vidyasagar's push to sanction widow remarriage and nullify Kulin polygamy, women stayed at the centre of the reformist discourse.²¹³ The feminist history of Bengal took a turn with the foundation of Victoria girls' school, later called Bethune school. With the opening of the school and later Bethune College, the image of a traditional woman began to change amid the 1870s. Men who previously were against the education of women and even declined to listen on the subject started to send their young daughters to school. A large number of educated men declared their support for the full freedom of women. For example, W. C. Bonerji, the founder of the Indian National Congress, promptly after his arrival from England began teaching his wife, Hemangini Devi. Many of the first generation of educated women started to critique the established patriarchal

²¹² Hur Chunder Dutt, *Bengali Life and Society* (Calcutta: Sanders, Cones and Co., 1853), p. 10-11.

²¹³ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of Women's Question*, p. 233.

traditions. At the same time, they also began to participate in the nationalist movement.²¹⁴ Geraldine Forbes argues that 'the assimilation of the women within the national politics was an effective strategy as it questioned the British and its civilising mission'.²¹⁵ In spite of Gandhi's highly dubious gender politics, his emergence as a political leader in the 1920s strengthened the position of women within nationalist politics, and the non-cooperation movement of 1921-22 recorded the large participation of women. The 'Quit India' movement of 1942 also saw a massive outpouring of female support.

Yet question of femininity and women's issues during the period remained problematically attached to patriarchal conventions. For example Sumit Sarkar has contended that the Bengali middle-class idea of the liberation drew upon the English education and modernity, yet tenaciously clung to the patriarchal notions of traditional society.²¹⁶ Many nationalist reformers, for example Keshab Chandra Sen, contended for less difficult subjects for women. They considered subjects like Geometry and Philosophy as "masculine" subjects. In 1878, Dwarkanath Tagore proclaimed that 'we are not against female education...we believe women should read only those books that will help them to become better wives and a better mother'.²¹⁷ Earlier in 1872, the magazine *Tattvabodhini Patrika* had vouched for a 'natural division of labour', by which men work outside while the women stay within the home.²¹⁸ Henceforth, from multiple points of view, contends Partha Chatterjee, this was

²¹⁴ Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban! A Modern Autobiography* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999), p. 1. Kailasbasini Devi, for example, contended for the freedom of women and education for all in 1867. Rasasundari Devi, the first Bengali woman auto-biographer, depicted in her diary the thorough *pardah* practice that she needed to obey after her marriage at twelve years old.

²¹⁵ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 21.

²¹⁶ Sumit Sarkar, 'Women's Question in nineteenth century Bengal', in Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid, ed., *Women and Culture* (Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies, 1985), pp. 157-72 (p. 165).

²¹⁷ Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali women to modernization* (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, 1983), p. 154-56.

²¹⁸ Sumit Sarkar, 'Women's Question in nineteenth century Bengal', p. 165.

another type of patriarchy.²¹⁹ In this new framework, women were trained, ordered and socially made 'better' than traditional women who were viewed as coarse, loud and vulgar. Thus, it was not a movement to liberate women, but rather part of the patriarchal project to modernise their world.

The nationalist politics of the early twentieth century embarked on a similar narrow view of femininity. In spite of the boost Gandhi's encouragement gave to the participation of women within the nationalist movement, his response towards 'the woman question' was parochial and conservative.²²⁰ While meeting women social workers, he at times reiterated that 'India needed women leaders who were pure, firm and self-controlled like the ancient heroines: Sita, Draupadi and Damyanti'.²²¹ During his stay in prison from 1922-28, Gandhi held meetings with women's social groups to emphasise the traditional image of Sita as a perfect wife.²²² Such participation, therefore, did not liberate women from the inner household but rather promoted a traditional ideology wherein female sexuality was legitimately embodied only in marriage, wifehood, motherhood, domesticity—all forms of controlling women's bodies.²²³ For the nationalist-reformist, therefore, the erotic elements of the folk tales and songs were a mark of obscenity which they found deeply embarrassing. Above all, the sexual explicitness of the *jhumur* or *kheud* song directly contested their imagination of the morally "pure" Indian woman as the good wife, as the custodian and sign

²¹⁹ Partha Chatterjee, 'Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: the contest in India', *American Ethnologist*, 16 (1989), p. 622-633.

²²⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution of Women's Question*, p. 237.

²²¹ M.K.Gandhi, *Women and Social Justice* (Ahmadabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1954), p. 4-5.

²²² M.K.Gandhi, 'Speech at Women's meeting', Coimbatore, October 16, 1927, in *Collected Works of M.K.Gandhi*, vol.Xxv, p. 148.

²²³ Ketu H.Katrak, 'Indian Nationalism, Gandhian "Satyagrah," and Representation of Female Sexuality', in Andrew Parker et al, ed., *Nationalism and Sexualities* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 395-406 (p. 395).

of modern state, and household, the pure, inner, 'spiritual' realm of self and culture unaffected by colonial encroachment.²²⁴

Sudhin Ghose breaks away from the nationalist imagination of a perfect Indian woman and represents alternative models of Indian femininity by consciously engaging with the women-centric folklore. He incorporates tales that question profound patriarchal models of womanhood presented during the nationalist period. For example, in the *Cradle of the Clouds*, Sudhin Ghose draws on a popular rain ritual performance called *halakarshna* in Bengal to form the climax of the novel.²²⁵ The novel is set in a remote village in Santhal Pargana (now in Jharkhand) at a time of drought. There is no hint of rain and the water from the reservoirs is depleting. The villagers and the tribal elders believe that a ritual based on the story of Balaram will bring rain. They decide that the women of the seven villages will enact the performance. The ritual required nude women. Discarding their sense of shame, women agree to perform the ritual.

In South Asia, there are different rituals performed by women for various purposes. The mythical episodes are profoundly embedded in ritual performance, and transmission of myth in a ritual is well-known to the folklorist working in the region. The ritual and mythic traditions are not the same as each other, yet now and again Peter J. Claus argues that 'both myth and ritual in a given setting tend to overlap into one another'.²²⁶ The vast majority of such performances have phalasaruti (statement of purpose) importance, and they are conducted to accomplish desired objectives, for example a child or rain. The ritual for rain is exceptionally prominent in Bengal and its adjoining areas. Sudhin Ghose draws on a popular

²²⁴ See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragment: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²²⁵ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 146.

²²⁶ Peter J. Claus, 'Ritual Transforms a Myth', *South Indian Folklorist*, 1 (1997), 33-57 (p. 37).

rain ritual performance called *halakarshna* in Bengal to form the climax of the novel.²²⁷ However, there is a striking contrast between the myth that appears in the novel and the actual ritual performance.

The myth behind the ploughing ritual as it appears in the *Cradle of the Clouds* is as follows:

An unusually hot summer once reduced the river Jumna to a thin thread of water, and that was the time when the tyrant Kansa decided to throw a dam across the river and divert its course to ruin the inhabitants of Brinda-ban: he wanted to subdue them but they were unwilling to accept his sway.

The dearth of water constrained the people of Brinda-ban to send their cattles away. This news pleased Kansa. 'while the men are away with their cattle their women remained undefended,' Kansa said to himself. 'I will send my mercenaries now and in the dead of the night they will burn down the town and humiliate its proud matrons.'

The tyrants project was partially carried out. The women of Brinda-ban had just time to run out of their burning houses snatching their babies with them. 'What shall we do when the day dawns? They sobbed. Who will protect us? Who will clothe us? 'Will you help me to pull my plough? Asked a little boy (Balaram)? 'I want to plough the fields round about here. In the morning when Kansa sees the furrow he will think that our men have not only been back, but have already been at work and getting ready to wreak vengeance on him.'²²⁸

²²⁷ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction*, p. 146. Folklorists have recorded such rituals in adjoining Bihar. Jhijiya and Jat-Jatin are annual rituals and are tied to seasonal activities. While Jat-jattin is performed to please rain god Indra, Jhijiya is enacted to keep away witches. Both these performances are exclusively performed by women and are not meant for entertainment.

²²⁸ Ghose, p. 89.

The traditional story-teller, Punditji, portrays the legendary story of Balaram and Kansa to present the reason behind the ploughing ceremony in the village.²²⁹ To familiarise the young narrator with the myth behind the actual performance, the Punditji narrates this long story. The entire function forms the climax of the novel. What is interesting though is the telling of the tale. Punditji keeps on depicting the villainy of Kansa. He emphasises that the women ran naked out of their houses and were worried about their modesty. They are shown to be helpless and crying out for help. Punditji establishes the men as protectors. When the actual performance begins, it is the women, however, who are central to the event. It is the task of the village and tribal women to protect their men and land from an inevitable drought.²³⁰ Now the women take centre-stage. In the myth, they ask for help: 'Who will protect us? Who will clothe us?' In sharp contrast, in the ritual performance, they shed off their clothes to save their men.

The ceremony begins with nightfall; women raise the paean, 'Hail! Balaram! Hail!' The young girls beautify the narrator with sandal pastes, flowers, and offer him a little furrow. They then carry pitchers of water to wet the land. At midnight, the ritual starts. In the courtyard of the house of the narrator a number of earthenware lamps, all filled with Sandalwood oil, are lit. Soon after, a rumbling din fills the air as though the mountains and hills were collapsing. A cloud of dust rises and 'Anjalir Ma' orders everybody to lie down. Lightning flashes tear the earth, and the rain finally arrives with thunder, situating women as the protectors at the time of extreme distress. Ghose brilliantly adapts folklore to break away from convention as, in his account, the women —Hindu, Muslim and Christian— all gather

²²⁹ Balaram in Hindu mythology is the brother of Krishna. He is also associated with fertility myth. Please see H.H.Wilson (trans.), *The Vishnu Purana: A System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition*, Book iv (London: Oxford University, 1840), p. 424.

²³⁰ For detailed study of women's ritual in Bengal see Sarah Lamb, 'The Beggared Woman: Older Women's Narrative in West Bengal', *Oral Tradition*, 12/1 (1997), 54-75 (p. 55). In women's ritual tales, female protagonist is often shown as the protector.

together to play out the service.²³¹ Sectarian divide is abandoned before his vision of communal harmony and sisterhood as the women develop and perform the whole ritual without any help from the men.²³²

In the entire ceremony, the narrator, with much hesitation, performs the role of young Balaram. While decorating her nephew for the ritual, the mashi-mama of the narrator continues murmuring 'whence first came the sense of shame and the feeling of guilt nobody knows'; she rehearses, 'these sentiments vary with men and women'.²³³ Commenting on the social customs, she emphasises that the patriarchal tradition considers immodesty and infidelity as the wrongdoing of women. Before, performing the ritual, she narrates a story in the novel to counter this formulation. In the story, a naked woman appears before the god, *Yama*.²³⁴ The Chitragupta, the recorder of vice and virtues, opens his record to punish her. The courtiers in the court of the lord *Yama* critique the woman for being naked. They consider the "naked woman" impure and virile. But later the goddess Chayya appears and argues for her freedom. She proclaims that she is not impure for she was in love. Discarding the set norms, the *Yama* releases the woman, saying that nobody can call her immodest:

All sins committed by word, thought, or deed, are noted down, according to Mashi-ma, in the great register, *Agrasandhani*, which is kept in the palace of the god Yama, Lord of the Nether-world and the Dispenser of Eternal justice. Chitra-Gupta the Recorder of the Yama's court writes down not only our major sins, but our minor failings as

²³¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Rabindranath Tagore: Subversive Songs for a Transcultural 'Religious Humanity', *Acta Musicologica*, 84/2 (2012), 147-59. Traditional Baul singers have inspired many Bengali authors including Rabindra nath Tagore. Bauls are the wandering minstrels of rural Bengal. They reject orthodox tradition through their songs. Their songs are transmitted orally.

²³² A humanist at core, Ghose adored Tagore. It is because of his closeness with Tagore and his humanism that he transcends the ideal of women's ritual and transforms it from being exclusive to inclusive.

²³³ Ghose, p. 242.

²³⁴ According to the Hindu mythology the god is believed to keep the record of the people's karma (doing). It is believed that he punishes and rewards an individual on the basis of his or her action.

well...A woman's sense of shame and the restraining influence of the feeling of guilt are her twin protectors in this world...What would then happen to one who has loved profoundly and for the sake of her love has been constrained to abandon her twin protectors? When such a woman is before the judgement throne, Chitra-Gupta the Recorder opens the register ... Yama's principal custodians, Kala-Purush and Maha-Chandal, Death and Dissolution, peer over the shoulders of Chitra-Gupta. They are amazed : her record is black. 'She is naked and ashamed'.

[...] 'I know her'. Chhaya, will plead for her. 'I know her sorrows and trials.' [...] 'Woman!' Yama, Lord of the Nether-world gives his verdict, 'Go in peace and be judged elsewhere. Let none molest her. Nor call her immodest.' Chitragupta writes across the page in letters of Vermillion: 'She was not immodest.'²³⁵

Sarah Lamb argues that 'it is through oral narrative that Bengali women critique and scrutinize the social world they experience, giving voice to the experiences through the language of story'.²³⁶ She goes on to argue that the 'oral' voice of these women forms a kind of subaltern voice. Here, similarly, the voice of Mashi-ma - middle aged woman - functions as a subaltern voice. She is an illiterate but deeply progressive woman who understands the significance of women's freedom and presents a counterweight to the established gender norms.²³⁷

Tanika Sarkar in her celebrated work *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2001) argues that though the social patriarchy was at its peak during the later decades of the nineteenth century, some women from the *bhadralok* household criticised past custom and celebrated

²³⁵ Ghose, p. 244-247.

²³⁶ Lamb, 'The Beggared Mother: Older Women's Narrative in West Bengal', p. 55.

²³⁷ Sarah Lamb argues that the older woman often complain about the behaviour of their son.

modernity.²³⁸ Citing the example of Rashsundari she claims that such women were aware of their subordination.²³⁹ Mashi-ma of the novel presents a similar protest against subjugation. In contrast to the Punditji, she is in favour of the modern education. Later on, she narrates the long story in the novel to invert the traditional image of the modest Bengali/Hindu woman. In the story, a woman experiences sexual desire for a man. As the expression 'naked and ashamed' proposes, she perhaps has broken the social code by enjoying a romance before getting married or by having an illicit relationship. The teller relevantly asks, what will happen to her? The subjects in the court of Yama think of her as liable: 'She is naked and ashamed'. Soon after, the teller presents goddess Chayya. She has seen the miseries of the woman and had seen her torments. She mediates and pronounces, 'I know this frail daughter of the earth, and I know her tears and her ecstasies'. She argues for her freedom, and the ruler of the netherworld declares that no one can call her immodest. Chitrugupta, the recorder, writes over the page in letters of vermillion: 'She was not immodest. She was in love. Let none call her immodest'.²⁴⁰ The story counters social norms, proclaiming that a passionate woman is "not immodest". Sudhin Ghose probably heard this story at home; subsequently, he employs this story to challenge the nationalist construction of modest woman. There is an added dimension: in the novel, Mashima tells this story to the narrator who is a small boy, to educate him in women's issues and get him used to female nudity: 'that you should not be severe on the women who will take part in the ceremony. Let your tongue never condemn them'.²⁴¹ Such a gesture - a middle-aged woman telling a small boy about female nudity - is quite extraordinary in South Asian fiction and completely transgresses social and gender norms.

²³⁸ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), p. 21.

²³⁹ Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, p. 20.

²⁴⁰ Ghose, p. 247. Sudhin Ghose belonged to the *Kayasth* (a caste) family. Chitrugupta is a popular deity in a *Kayasth* household.

²⁴¹ Ghose, p. 248.

The story likewise cathartically affects the teller, the mashi-mama of the narrator. The narrator was the only boy in the midst of all the naked women. To make the little child understand the significance of such an act, she narrates the above story. The telling of the tale thus relieves Mashi-ma from a sense of feeling awkward in front of her child like nephew. To understand this, I will refer to a Tamil folktale. A.K. Ramanujan, in his famous essay on women-centric tales, quotes a popular Tamil story.²⁴² The story is intriguing for it says nothing in regard to the family becoming kinder at last, or her family being changed. It is the telling itself that relieves woman from her distress. The story cited above has a similar impact on the teller. The Mashi-mama tells the story to the narrator in order to make him aware regarding the nudity of the women performers. The telling relieves her from a sense of guilt. The story, thus, cathartically affects the teller and also the readers.

In *The Flame of the Forest* (1955), the author once again draws on the women-centric folklore. Ghose draws on the famous *bhakti* tradition of Bengal to weave a romantic relationship. The *bhakti* movement in South Asia gave alternative space to women. By underlining that God abides in all, both high and low, the *bhakti* movement questioned patriarchal brahminical tradition, opening the doors for women. Indeed, even while the female *bhaktas* rarely allude to their femininity, there is a move in the language from Sanskrit to vernacular, developing a new kind of devotional literature to express women's creativity.

²⁴³ Women artists, especially, illustrate the tensions of home and the outside world, household

²⁴² A.K. Ramanujan, 'Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales', p. 36. In the story, an old woman is harassed by her son and daughter-in-law. The woman stays quiet and never talks. The weight of her distress makes her heavier with every passing day, making her fatter and fatter. Her son taunts her body. One day she leaves home and goes to a deserted place. There she finds a dishevelled house. She goes into the house and begins sobbing. She then confides her sorrows to one of the walls. When she completes her story, the wall falls. She now becomes less fat. The woman then turns to another wall and speaks out her sorrows. The wall again falls, transforming the old woman into a thin individual. Her stories lead to the decimation of the walls, and she feels lighter in mood and goes back home.

²⁴³ See Rekha Pande, *Divine Sounds from the Heart-Singing Unfettered in their own Voices: The Bhakti Movement and its Women Saints*.

chores and the restriction of a married life. In numerous cases, they dismiss traditional bondage, forsake their husband and meander alone, singing in the acclaim of the Lord. David Kinsley argues, 'in many devotional movements, the theoretical harmony between doing one's duty (dharma) and loving the Lord (*bhakti*) is questioned'.²⁴⁴ He represents cases from the Krishna mythology with Radha as its focal point of devotion to show how, in the life of a woman saint, the devotion to God turns into an alternative to marriage.²⁴⁵ According to Ramanujan, *bhakti* itself is feminine and so even a male devotee has to 'accept the feminine side of himself' for the union with the divine.²⁴⁶ The female *bhaktas* particularly record the protest against patriarchy; denouncing social tradition they wander lonely in love of their deity. They struggle against family, husband, molesters, Brahmans, social restrictions, and even for entry into the congregation of saints. Ramanujan claims they 'even rebuke men for sexual advances, and teach them a lesson when they treat her as a 'sex object''.²⁴⁷ Some of them even throw away their clothes, abandoning modesty they walk free without any sense of

²⁴⁴David Kinsley, 'Devotion as an alternative to Marriage in the lives of some Hindu Women Devotees', in Jayant Lele, ed., *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements* (Leiden: International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology, 1981), pp. 83-93 (p. 83).

²⁴⁵ David Kinsley, 'Devotion as an alternative to Marriage in the lives of some Hindu Women Devotees', p. 83.

²⁴⁶ A.K. Ramanujan, 'On Women Saints', in Vinay Dharwadker, ed., *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; 2004), pp. 270- 271 (p. 270). Also see A.K. Ramanujan, 'Men, Women and Saints', in Vinay Dharwadker, ed., *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999; 2004), pp. 272-92 (p. 290). In the *Virasaiva* tradition of Bhakti, Ramanujan argues that a male saint not only drops his caste pride but also his masculinity, 'he becomes a woman, so that he can be open to the lord'. A male saint desires to attain a feminine state, so that he can couple with the God. Ramanujan, to show such a transition, records a beautiful song by Basavanna:

Look here, dear fellow:

I wear these clothes

Only for you.

Sometimes I am man,

sometimes I am woman.

O Lord of the meeting rivers,

I'll make wars for you,

But I'll be your devotees' bride. (Ramanujan)

²⁴⁷ A.K. Ramanujan, 'On Women Saints', in Vinay Dharwadker, ed., *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, p. 275.

shame. Mahadevi, who defied social norms by abandoning her clothes, wrote poetry in defence of nudity.²⁴⁸

If the rain ceremony embeds the novel in the world of folk ritual, at the level of plot and symbol, the representation of Myna aligns it with the realm of the *Vaishnav Kirtani*. To understand the depth of Ghose's engagement with this tradition, it is important to explore its historical contexts. Ghose builds the character of a *Vaishnav Kirtani*, the devotional singer, ostracised and banned during the late nineteenth century, to construct a romantic relationship. In Bengal during the nineteenth century, the women devotional singers were very popular and frequented the streets of Calcutta. They performed the songs and stories of Radha and Krishna to the audience members, both high and low. These women were, for the most part, *Vaishnav* and originated from different backgrounds. Their lovers forsook some of them and to escape prostitution they joined different troupes; though some were prostitutes who after reaching old age had lost their occupation and become instead devotional singers. The religious movement allowed the devotional artists to move within various corners of society, giving them freedom in their connection with men. The vast majority of the artists roamed around Calcutta, singing from door to door. One such folk singer was Jogeshwari, who thrived during the 1820s and 1830s.²⁴⁹ She was a contemporary of the celebrated kabyals, Bholā Moirā and Nilu Thakur. The songs of Jogeshwari uncovered the circumstances of women of the time. Bhabani, the devotional singer, followed her during the 1850s, and the Durgadas Lahiri's *Bengalir Gaan* (Bengali songs) records her name. She belonged to a family

²⁴⁸ People,
Male and female,
Blush when
A cloth covering their shame comes loose.
When all the world is the eye of the lord
On looking everywhere, what can you
Cover and conceal? (Mahadeviakka; translated by Ramanujan)

²⁴⁹ Susie Tharu and K.Lalita ed., *Women Writing in India 600 BC to early 20th Century* (USA: The Feminist Press, 1995), p. 187.

of goldsmiths and drove two troupes that gave *tarja* and *jhumur* performances.²⁵⁰ Although a large number of her songs were religious, some of them were deeply subversive too.

In the meantime, the devotional singers also frequented the upper-class family households to teach female individuals. Devendranath Tagore states that 'the singers were trained as teachers of women-folk for the purpose of spreading the education, and in the early years of the nineteenth century were educational assets'.²⁵¹ The elite households of Bengal and the colonial government later considered the devotional singers shameful. Now and again, the police were brought in to disband social events, and there was a significant decrease in the number of *tarja* and *jhumur* troupes before the end of the nineteenth century. With the passage of time, the elite households gradually banned these devotional singers. By creating the character of Myna, a devotional singer, Ghose critiques the banishment of the women performers and presents an alternative version of Bengali/Hindu women.

When taunted by a Bengali *babu* (emphasis mine), Myna, the devotional singer in the novel, proudly declares her profession:

'I am only a kirtani,' Myna answered with a smile. 'Singing kirtans is my profession. What am I? A plain woman who sings plain songs in the praise of the Lord. [sic] A kirtani is a companion of Radha the divine shepherdess. And what is she? Less than the red dust of Braja that Radha trod.'²⁵²

The passage underlines the significance of the women performers in nineteenth-century Bengal. Myna records her occupation, depicting herself as a plain woman who sings in praise of the Lord. She refers to herself as the companion of Radha, the divine shepherdess. The

²⁵⁰ Susie Tharu and K.Lalita ed., *Women Writing in India 600 BC to early 20th Century*, p. 188.

²⁵¹ Quoted from Melville. T. Kennedy, *The Chaitanya Movement: A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal*, p. 86.

²⁵² Ghose, p. 88.

female artist who in her humbleness says, 'what is she?' is indeed a female *bhakti* saint. The *Vaishnav kirtanis*, the devotional singer, in particular contributed to the formation of an alternative gender discourse. Disavowing traditional marriage and the household dictates accompanying it; the women saints and the devotional singers such as Myna constructed a useful category for analysing the power equation in society. The status of women is the recurrent theme in her songs. Her performance at *Kalighat* shrine (quoted above) is from the female point of view and describes the situation of Radha. She finally initiates the reluctant narrator into the world of devotion. In sharp contrast to Rao's Savithri who also turns into Radha but remains humble in her relationship with Rama, Myna asserts her individuality in her relationship with Balaram. The whole narrative situates Myna as the *guru* (mentor) of Balaram, inverting traditional gender hierarchies through folklore.²⁵³

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator is sceptical about his relationship with Myna, a nautch-girl. An elite Bengali babu, he demeans Myna through various offensive remarks. Even when he visits the shrine to listen to Myna's performance, he shows a sense of displeasure. Myna, on the other hand, keeps on calling the narrator to join her troupe. But Balaram always declines her invitation. At last, Balaram embroils himself in a political conspiracy. His employer Diwan Nishikant is put under house arrest by the government officials. The narrator is also booked on charges of sedition. He gets into political trouble in the wake of his discussion with Charles Andrews, a minor character in the novel. The connection leads to subversive charges and the police authorities start looking for him. Finally, he leaves Calcutta on a steamer but steps out at Naogoan to witness a performance taking place at the bank of the river: :

²⁵³ The wife of Chaitanya, Vishnupriya, is said to have initiated the male students in a similar manner.

The steamer birthed at the jetty of Noa Gaon [sic]. The din was the music of welcome to greet the passengers—not all the passengers, only the pilgrims disembarking at Nao Gaon. There was some sort of festival, and the landing-place was gaily decorated with flags and festoons. On the river bank itself the *jatra* show was in the progress- a mystery play with songs and interludes of religious dancing. The orchestra of the *jatra* consisted mainly of cymbals, bells, gongs, and an infinite variety of drums.

[...] The cymbal-crashers were mostly women, dressed in stiff costumes and wearing papier-mâché masks covering the upper part of their faces: they had elaborate headgear.²⁵⁴

What we have here is a *jatra* in progress.²⁵⁵ He depicts the place filled with banners and posters alongside the music. The sound of the music intoxicates the narrator, and he enters the crowd to watch the play. Much like Ramaswamy of *The Serpent and the Rope* (1961), the narrator is filled with inner conflicts. While Ramaswamy, at last, recalibrates himself through discovering comfort in a *guru* who takes him into the significant brahminical tradition of Vedanta, the narrator reconciles through Krishna devotion and Myna initiates him into this new world:

I gave only a cursory glance at the *jatra* show. The masked actors and actresses were certainly from Shearikhela. One of the singers was extolling the mysterious nature of Krishna: the dark touchstone that tries gold, the source of all bliss; everything in the world is a manifestation of his many attributes...

²⁵⁴ Ghose, p. 282.

²⁵⁵ According to Sumanta Banerjee, *Jatra* was profoundly prominent among a group of the respectable *bhadraloks* in the nineteenth century. The children of the bourgeois of Calcutta set up amateur *jatra* troupes, drawn by its prevalence. Among them were Srinath Sen, son of Gurcharan Sen; Ramachandra Mukhopadhyay, who was a dewan of Chhatu Babu; and Swarup Dutt of Hadkata. During the later nineteenth century, the *jatra* melodies from the Gopal Uday troupe were exceptionally prominent. See Sumant Banerjee, *Parlour and the street: elite and popular culture in nineteenth century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1989).

Thou art the black bee...
The grace of the coryphée,
The green bird with the red beak,
The sable cloud in whose breast sleep
The lightning, the seasons and the sea.

‘Always in a hurry!’ she asked as she raised her mask: she was Myna.²⁵⁶

In the novel, the *jatra* song is used to express and dramatise the relationship between Balaram and Myna. Ghose utilizes the evocative and affective nature of song to hint at the final union of the two individuals. The *jatra*-play, therefore, is no mere embellishment to the plot but organically related to provide a certain intensity of feeling to the plot; the play and the song lead to a heightening of the mood and tone of the novel, an expansion in the sensibility of the characters that allows Myna to have a fresh perception of herself and participate in a liason that is illicit. Much like Rangi of the *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, she effectively protests against the feudal patriarchy.

Myna begins to draw on the mysterious nature of Krishna celebrated in the play, and connects it with her current circumstances. While drawing on the *Vedantic* idea of equality, Myna, the *jatra* performer, stresses on the presence of the one and same Brahman in man, woman, animal or cloud: her sensibility expands, through the performance, to a more inclusive consciousness akin to Radha who sees Krishna in every object. Folk performance here thus functions not just at the level of plot but infuses the whole narrative consciousness with a certain Hindu mysticism.²⁵⁷ She continues her performance as Krishna's messenger, and conveys his message to Balaram through a 'simple touch'.²⁵⁸ The singing captivates Balaram and eases his inner conflict. Myna reprimands the narrator for his lack of interest and incorporates him into the *Krishna bhakti*. The song and the play are, subsequently, the

²⁵⁶ Ghose, p. 286.

²⁵⁷ B. R. Rajan Iyer, *Rambles in Vedānta* (Calcutta: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1946; 1991), p. 373. The song and the theory are derived from *Svetasvatara* Upanishad.

²⁵⁸ Ghose, p. 287.

defining moments within the narrative, uniting the two lovers. After finishing her performance, she urges the narrator to go with her as a flute player. She helps him to remember his deeds as Balaram in the village. The narrator accepts her invitation pronouncing, 'to be a nameless wanderer in her company, to seek the world, would be a privilege'.²⁵⁹ Myna and Balaram perceive themselves as mythic personalities: the *jatra* episode thus leads to a perceptual and emotional expansiveness, adding a certain mythic grandeur and otherworldliness to Ghose's fiction.

Along with such sustained engagement with such rituals and indigenous traditions, Ghose also employs popular sayings in the novel drawn from the world of folklore. While Rao in *Kanthapura* (1938) employs proverbs to present a female voice, Ghose includes sayings to represent the bawdiness of the singer:

A mare by bridles restrain, and an elephant by a bar,
A damsel fair by her heart: otherwise the answer is "Depart"!²⁶⁰

At one point in the narrative, Myna is amused to hear the narrator's tales and his experiences with the Dog of Diwan, Piram. His stories delight her, and she recounts the saying to remind him about the relationship between them. She teases him, humorously emphasising that a bridle restricts a mare, an elephant by the bar, yet it is only affection that restrains a beautiful woman. To this, the narrator retorts:

Nature herself gives women wit;
Men may learn from books a bit.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Ghose, p. 288.

²⁶⁰ Ghose, p. 87.

²⁶¹ Ghose, p. 89.

Again, going against patriarchal norms, women are celebrated as intuitively insightful and intelligent, as against the learned knowledge of men: such proverbs serve as ballast to the status of Myna.

The different performances, stories, songs and proverbs are utilised to create an oral style of portrayal, delving deep into the world of myth and ritual. Such incorporations dramatise and ironise complex situations, regularly re-implementing the importance of the oral custom in the contemporary world. They open up the novel in wholly fresh ways, particularly in its subtle reconfiguration of gender relations as well as forming an emotive substratum of experience, rooted in indigenous traditions - such as the rain ritual, the jatra festival, the *Vaishnav Kirtani* - which serves as a counter-narrative of Western modernism. Unlike Rao, Ghose does not try to translate the cadences of the vernacular into English. Instead, the interpretation and transmission of the oral stories delve far deeper into the emotional, intellectual and narrative resources of the indigenous tradition. As I have analysed, he constructs a model of Indian femininity entirely different from the nationalist version of womanhood during 1940s and 1950s. In sharp contrast to Rao, Ghose challenges the Gandhian view of femininity through the employment of tales, songs, performances and sayings. His idea of women is progressive and often challenges the strict social norms that restrict women within their households. The engagement with the popular folklore thus also becomes a quintessential method of portraying such an altered vision of womanhood in Bengal.

Chapter Five

“Battle as Metaphor”: Tamil Folk Myth in Rajan’s *The Dark Dancer*

‘I found it difficult to believe that human beings could be like this. It was as if the demons had come down on the earth...it is when the demon gets into Shivji that he dances the tandav nritya, the dance

of death and destruction...it was as if this spirit had got into everyone, men and women. Partition was like a tandav nritya'—Kamalaben Patel¹

I began to realize that Partition was surely more than just a political divide, or a division of properties, of assets and liabilities. It was also, to use a phrase that survivors use repeatedly, 'division of hearts'—Urvashi Butalia²

In this chapter, I examine the employment of Tamil folklore and myth in Balachandra Rajan's novel *The Dark Dancer*, published in 1958. In particular, I shall focus on the iconic image of Nataraj from the Tamil folk mythology and the image of Sita in folklore. I begin by examining Rajan's response to nationalism; my focus will then shift to the analysis of the image of Nataraj, the divine dancer, as it appears in the novel. The dance symbolism in the novel is repeatedly invoked with reference to the complex political unrest of 1947: both creation and destruction are inherent, the symbolism is made to suggest, in the final achievement of the freedom and the trauma of partition. Rajan draws on the image to suggest a nationalist version of the Partition that justified the violence as the birth pangs of the new nation. Also, I examine the representation of Kamala as folk Sita from the epic Ramayana. But Rajan's source is a very specific version of the ancient epic, one that was adapted and narrated in South India as a protest against the male dominance. Narayan Rao, in his study of women's folk songs, observes that while public rendering of the text, at one level, adheres to the accepted values of a male-dominated world, as in the ancient epic, the local version incorporates many Telugu folk songs: these songs, popular among women, displace the public events of war and coronation with the domestic issues of childbirth and give women a

¹ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996), p. 133. Originally the memoir was published as (Mool Soot Ukhade) *Torn Up By the Roots*. Kamalaben Patel, *Mool Soot Ukhade* (Bombay; Ahmedabad, R.R.Co. and Seth, 1985). Also see Svati Joshi, *Torn Up By the Roots* (Summary), *Manushi*, 48(1988), 14-16.

² Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, p. 8.

central role.³ In many of these tellings, the image of Sita as a docile victim is inverted; in one of the folk Puranas, she even emerges in battle-dress and goes out to the battle-field to fight for her dignity. The novel shows a similar inversion. Kamala, ‘an obedient Hindu wife’, goes out to the war-torn areas of Punjab and sacrifices her life while fighting for the honour and dignity of a refugee woman. It is this extraordinary development of the character of Kamala that I wish to examine. The chapter investigates how these two very different myths—Nataraj the divine dancer and the freshly empowered Sita—are woven into the novel to provide urgency to its central romance plot as well as lend a religio-symbolic depth to its historical background of the 1947 unrest against which the plot unfolds. Why does Rajan fall back on the world of ancient myth and epic, and how does that affect the unfolding of his novel?

A Scholar in the Making: Early Childhood and Literary Influences

Before we embark on the investigation of the novel, it is important to rehearse a few facts about the author and the basic plot. Born in 1920 at Toungoo, Burma, Balachandra Rajan was the son of Justice Arunachalam Tyagrajan and Vesalam. Justice Tyagrajan was a strict disciplinarian. He sent him to Madras for early education where young Rajan spent his time with his married sister and her husband. His father, though, continued to keep an eye on Rajan’s lessons and reprimanded him for not securing the first position in exams. Later, in 1939, Rajan was sent to England to prepare for the Cambridge University Exam. Rajan cleared the preparatory examination and went on to study economics at Cambridge. Much to his father’s delight, Rajan secured First Class honours, but soon abandoned economics for English literature. His father did not welcome this decision and denied the provision of any

³Velcheru Narayana Rao, ‘A Rāmāyaṇa of Their Own: Women’s Oral Tradition in Telugu’, pp. 114-136.

financial help to the young scholar.⁴ Initially, Rajan was granted a fellowship at Trinity College. However, when the authorities found out about Rajan's social status, they cancelled the grant and Rajan eventually had to pursue many difficult professions in order to undertake his study. In 1942, Rajan finished his BA with First Class Honours, and in 1944 he was awarded an MA in English. Rajan became the editor of the journal *Focus* and went on to do research on Milton. His original thesis entitled '*Paradise Lost*' and the *Seventeenth Century Reader* was published in 1947 and sixty-two years after its publication, it is still in use. The book contextualises Milton within the intellectual milieu of the poet's own times. It quickly established Rajan as a leading critic in Milton studies.

Rajan married Chandra Sharma in 1946 and secured an appointment with Cambridge University. However, the climate had become vitiated and Rajan discovered that he had nowhere to go but home.⁵ Earlier in 1944, under parental pressure, Rajan had sat for the Civil Services Exam, but the viva was terminated on account of his anti-imperial writings and speeches supporting the Quit India movement. Soon after his return from England, he joined the Indian Foreign Service. He travelled to the USA as a resident representative of India at the International Atomic Energy Agency. It was here that Rajan the scholar wrote his first novel. Tillottama Rajan, the daughter of B. Rajan, rightly points out, 'he never wanted to be a diplomat. Having turned away from the academic world, he turned to creative writing instead'.⁶ In 1961, Rajan resigned from the Indian Foreign Service and returned to the academic world. He went on to become Professor and Head of the English Department at the

⁴ K. B. Gulati, 'Chronology', in David L. Clark ed., *The Genius of the Shore: Essays Honouring Life and Work of Balachandra Rajan*, University of Toronto Quarterly, 80 (2011), 769-73 (p. 769).

⁵ David L. Clark, 'Introduction: On the Lessons of Balachandra Rajan', in David L. Clark ed., *The Genius of the Shore: Essays Honouring Life and Work of Balachandra Rajan*, University of Toronto Quarterly, 80 (2011), 619-51 (p. 619).

⁶ Personal email conversation with B. Rajan's Scholar daughter, Tilottama Rajan, dated 30 December, 2015.

University of Delhi in 1960. Later, in 1966, he moved to Western Ontario University, Canada as Senior Professor of English and remained in North America until his death in 2009.

The period when Rajan was studying at Cambridge was the era of intense nationalism in India. The nationalist movement became particularly intense during the 1930s, and on 8, August 1942 the All India Congress Committee (A.I.C.C.) passed the Quit India resolution. In response, in the early hours of 9 August, the prominent Congress leaders were arrested and sent to jail.⁷ The concealed attack on the leaders produced an enormous response, and a large number of people gathered at Gowalia tank in Bombay (now Mumbai) to show their support for the leaders. Public demonstration and procession followed and many districts of U.P and Bihar went on hartals.⁸ The response of the government was equally strong, and it went on gagging the press and other means of public communication. At the time, Rajan was in Cambridge and the waves of nationalism had reached the University. A nationalist within, he responded to the political upheaval in his writing:

During the Quit India movement, I was a vigorous but not vociferous participant. Vigorous because I licked at One-third of the envelopes that carried the Quit-India exhortation. (Sic) Not vociferous because I was terrified of public speaking and had several times deleted my name from Speaker's lists for debate at the Cambridge Union.⁹

Intriguingly, it was during this phase that Rajan began his research on Milton. He humorously quips, 'while urging the British to quit India; I also began study of Milton, who might not have approved of what my left hand was doing'.¹⁰ So much in Rajan's life depends

⁷ The government had tightened its noose and was ready to suppress any outbreak with considerable force. On 8, August 1940, the Viceroy, Linlithgow wrote, 'I feel very strongly that the only possible answer to a 'declaration of war' by any section of Congress in the present circumstances must be a declared determination to crush the organization as a whole'.

⁸Bipin Chandra et al, *India's Struggle for Independence*, p. 461.

⁹Balachandra Rajan, 'Autobiographical Fragment', p. 661.

¹⁰BalachandraRajan, 'Autobiographical Fragment', p. 661.

on the interceding comma, which joins and overlaps the two worlds. It recalls a list of figures who were staunchly anti-colonial and nationalist but who had been shaped by and whose deepest interests lay in the field of the literature and the language of the coloniser: English. Very much like his predecessors, such as Aurobindo Ghose and Sarojini Naidu, Rajan protested against the British rule while penning English prose.¹¹ Like Naidu, he remained deeply attached to Gandhian nationalism, and in his writing he went on to produce a character modelled on Gandhi's principle of sacrifice. In many ways, the nationalist politics of the period as well as his personal relationship with his father shaped his first novel.

The Dark Dancer, published in 1958, is semi-autobiographical. It draws on Rajan's complex relationship with his father and shows his displeasure at the orthodox brahminical lineage. Set in post-1946, the novel discusses the partition as well as the complex relationship between the protagonist Krishnan and his wife Kamala.¹² Krishnan returns home after ten years of stay in England in order to get married. He dislikes the conservative strand of his Brahmin origin but succumbs to the parental pressure. He joins the civil service under compulsion and unwillingly marries Kamala but later they separate. After separation, Kamala travels to West Punjab to commit herself to the work of rescuing women and children. Meanwhile Krishnan gets together with Cynthia, an English woman he had met at Cambridge, for whom he had left Kamala but the two reunite together towards the end of the novel. Yet, at the very cusp of the reunion, Kamala dies while saving a Muslim woman refugee. The personal and the political are intermingled throughout the narrative. The image of Nataraj appears at key moments, while the image of Shiva dancing in the circle of flames reflects the duality of the historical experience as well as the union and separation of Krishnan and Kamala. Interwoven with this symbolism is the character of Kamala, who

¹¹Elleke Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals 1870-1915* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 23.

¹²Rajan must have faced the question of readership while writing his novels. Highlighting this question is beyond the scope of this thesis.

evolves from the model Hindu wife to an embattled saviour figure, fighting for the rights of the Partition-ravaged Muslim women and children, as the two very different images of the Sita—from the different versions—meet and clash.

The image of the Dark Dancer

The Dark Dancer (1958) shares close links with Tamil folk mythology. The Tamil area of South India has an extraordinarily rich local tradition of mythology, very different in various ways from the classical tradition. The local legends and songs surrounding the mythical figures such as Nataraj and the village goddess provide what David Shulman has called ‘a peculiar variant’ of the Hindu myth.¹³ The image of Nataraja or the dark dancer is at the centre of this alternative tradition. Through the cult of Nataraj, the figure of the divine dancer became pre-eminent in Tamil folk mythology, a symbol of the complex dialectic between creation and destruction.¹⁴ The dance of bliss or the *Anand Tandavam* of Shiva is said to symbolize the five divine acts (Panch krityas) of creation, sustenance, dissolution, concealment and bestowment of grace. The dance of Shiva is replicated in a frozen metal and is worshipped in most of the Shaivite temples in Tamil Nadu. Also if Shiva is the god of chaos and darkness in Tamil myth, he is also benevolent redeemer. The Tamil *bhakti* tradition draws on this blissful aspect of Nataraj.¹⁵ Rajan, too, structurally embeds the intricacies of the Tamil *bhakti* tradition through the song sung in praise of the deity.

¹³ David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South India Tamil Śaiva Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 3. By folk mythology I mean the oral narrative forms distinct from folk epics, ballads, folktales and so on. These are local cults situated at a particular region and is held sacred within a particular (sometimes) caste.

¹⁴ David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South India Tamil Śaiva Tradition*, p. 213.

¹⁵ Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

The novel begins with the homecoming of Krishnan, after a ten-year stay in England. Krishnan is not simply coming home; he is coming back to get married. At his wedding reception, a singer sings a song in praise of Nataraj, the dark dancer:

The nightingale of the Carnatic was not present, but her heir apparent sang, a plump stocky figure seated in front of a microphone, clapping her hands in unison with the music. She sang of Shiva dancing in the great temple of Chidambaram, the timeless dance in which each gesture is eternity, with every movement of that mighty form expressing and exhausting the history of a universe. “You who danced with your limbs held high, the moon in your forehead and the river Ganga on your matted locks, lift me great Shiva as your limbs are lifted”.¹⁶

He saw the great figure of Nataraj, one leg arched in that supreme energy, the dying smile of the demon beneath the other’s lightness, all that infinite power of destruction drawn back into the bronze circle repose. Paradox, contradiction, miracle- they were the barriers to which the explanation was driven. But at least in the hypnotic figure the paradox was radiance in one’s senses, the intense union of power with tranquillity, not captured but liberated in that eternal dancing. And the miracle was not that of a single individual’s unrepeatable insight, Ozymandias lost beneath the seventh city, there to be disinterred by the sure hands of Blenkinsau and placed in the great vestibule for millions to gape on.

[...]Creation, Destruction. Two concepts, but one dance, the trampling leg, the outthrust arms asserting the law invincibly, ecstatically, the drums beating, the strings

¹⁶Rajan, p. 28.

plucked in supplicating monotony, raise me, raise me into the mystery's centre; for something to be born something must die.¹⁷

The song sung in praise of the Nataraj at the wedding invokes *bhakti* ideology, where a personal communion is sought to move away from worldly cares.¹⁸ While comparing the Sanskrit verse that treats the dance of Shiva and a *bhakti* hymn, Indira Viswanathan observes that, while the aim of the Sanskrit poet is to offer intellectual and aesthetic stimulation to the audience, the Tamil *bhakti* hymn is the projection of the poet's personal feeling and experience.¹⁹ In the *bhakti* poems, the inner state of the "I" is of utmost importance. The above-quoted song similarly expresses the passionate love for the god in a personal tone, as in 'lift me great Shiva as your limbs are lifted'. The vocabulary of the poem is noteworthy, for it corresponds to the specific sculptural conception of the dance of the Shiva.

The detailed description of the song and the resultant vision that Krishnan experiences, however, is replete with symbolism. At a personal level, the song signals the beginning of a personal relationship that finally results in tragedy. The image of Nataraj produced through the song of the singer enfolds the dialectic tension between the union and separation of the Kamala and Krishnan. At an immediate narrative level, the song takes Krishnan into deep tranquility. After staying away from his homeland for ten years, he feels awkward and trapped in the presence of his family and his surroundings. He tries to shed off Tamil Brahmin lineage, but finally gives in and reluctantly marries Kamala at the behest of his family - thus closely following the story of the author's life. The song sung in praise of the Nataraj is meant to signify the union of the two individuals, but here, it is richly ironic for this

¹⁷Rajan, p. 28-29.

¹⁸ Since the beginning of the Sixth century, *bhakti* as a new form of religion developed in South India. It is a religion of intimate personal relationship with the gracious god. Often the song is sung in praise of the deity and presents a personal intimacy between the saint and lord.

¹⁹ Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 28.

union does not take place in the novel. Krishnan misunderstands Kamala as a typical Hindu wife. Both he and Kamala are almost forced into the marriage and though the song is sung at their wedding day, the occasion is not joyous for them. The seed of discord is thus planted on their wedding, incesting the vision of the divine dancer glimpsed on that day with ironic symbolism for the relationship ends rather tragically.

The image of the Nataraj recurs repeatedly within the narrative. For instance, after marrying Kamala, Krishnan comes to the Delhi Secretariat as an officer. Kamala accompanies him. Paradoxically, Krishnan, who had earlier condemned bureaucratic jobs, eventually becomes a “file pusher”. He decides to keep on being pleasant, half-heartedly carrying out his profession, but is intelligent enough to understand the impending threat. He is aware of the statistical data and begins to feel an undercurrent of violence as the appropriation of the assets of India and Pakistan begins by June 1947. In the meantime, he meets Cynthia Banbridge, his Cambridge colleague. Shedding off ties with his family, Krishnan, after a brief relationship, abandons Kamala. He begins his new life with Cynthia. The figure of Nataraj reappears, not as song or image, but as object—a statue—at the moment when Krishnan breaks the news of his infidelity to his wife:

“Kruger gave us a Nataraj.” She said. She took it lovingly out of the straw and tissue paper. She put it in the only possible place, and two bottles of coconut oil and a tin of Amrutanjan were demoted.

He didn’t know how to begin, and then he reminded himself that it didn’t matter how, and that no matter how bland the words or adequate the reasons, they couldn’t blunt the cutting edge of the fact. He might just as well blurt it out; it was ugly, however unavoidable, and why should he try to disguise or civilise it?

He said, “I’ve been seeing Cynthia all the time since you went away.”

“I know,” she said very quietly. “I have been told about it.”
[...] “I can’t go on staying with you, Kamala.”
[...] “I don’t expect you to.”²⁰

The whole ritual becomes a metaphor: it is not the creative but the destructive aspect of the dark dancer, one who separates people and splinters relationships, that is invoked here. Krishnan chooses the moment to declare that he cannot go on living with her anymore. If the poetic reference to the song sung in praise of Nataraj at their wedding conveyed the supposed meeting; the image now reappears to declare the end of the relationship. Meeting and separation, both inherent in the figure of the dark dancer, characterise the nature of the relationship between the two characters.

There is also rich political symbolism. Violence of Punjab both before and after Partition moves the plot, but towards the end as India breaks apart and mass-killing appall the world when they take place in a land liberated by pacifist tactics, is paralleled by what happens in Krishnan’s life.²¹ Rajan’s novel is set against the background of the transfer of power from British government to the Indian nation-state. The bronze image, with one leg raised in violent supreme energy, in an entranced state of dance, signifies within the novel the political upheaval in India. The novel is set around 1946 and 47. At the wedding party, mentioned above, the guests contemplate the transfer of power from the British to the Indians: the phrase ‘when the British leave’ resonates throughout the first part of the novel. The four day feasting takes place after marriage of Krishnan. Among the guests is the nationalist Vijay Raghvan. He keeps on referring to “Demonstrations” following the Quit India movement. Later he invites Krishnan to one such demonstration; however, he remains suspicious of his participation. Krishnan though seems excited ‘for reasons that oddly has nothing to do with

²⁰Rajan, p. 145.

²¹ George Woodcock, ‘Balachandra Rajan: Critic as Novelist’, *World Literature Written in English* 23 (1984), 442-51 (p. 443).

politics'.²² Ironically, it is the politics that dominates their conversation, replete with references to the Quit India Movement. The civil servants like Sundersan remain sceptical, stating that nothing will change with the transfer of power; when the British leave, Congress comes in with similar policies. In the middle of the conversation the dark dancer appears. The protagonist apprehends the violence and recalls the image through a song sung at the wedding feast, remarking: 'all that power of destruction drawn back into the bronze circle'.²³ Rajan draws on the iconic image to suggest the impending destruction. In Tamil mythology, the dance of Nataraj refers to the sacrificial symbolism of the ancient times that prophesied that man, woman, or any other living being, survives only by devouring other forms of life.²⁴ It suggests the ancient Tamil philosophy that for 'something to be born, something must die'.²⁵ Hence, ringing in a sonorous note, the song sung in praise of Nataraj that produces the vivid image of the dancer in the hearer's mind forms an uncanny revelation of the upcoming violence in the form of the Partition. South Asian historians have repeatedly noted the speed and messiness of the final British retreat from India.²⁶ Since the declaration of the Second World War in 1939, the political situation was changing fast in the subcontinent; the war-weary army and a ravaged economy were two of the primary causes for the British retreat.²⁷ The massive Labour victory of 1945 further quickened the process. Edwin Mountbatten came to India as the last Viceroy. He was charged to wind up the Raj by June 30, 1948. Intriguingly, the government later decided on an early transfer of power on the basis of Dominion status to two successor states, India and Pakistan. The speed with which the transfer was done was disastrous. According to the historian Sumit Sarkar, 'the Seventy-two

²² Rajan, p. 26.

²³ Rajan, p. 28.

²⁴ David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myth*, p. 90.

²⁵ David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths: Sacrifice and Divine Marriage in the South India Tamil Śaiva Tradition*, p. 213.

²⁶ See Bipin Chandra et al, *India's Struggle for Independence*.

²⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p. 417.

Days' timetable for the transfer of power and the division of the country led to the trauma of partition.²⁸ The boundaries between the two states were not officially known until two days before the independence, resulting in a bitter and vicious feud between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.²⁹ The uncertainty and turmoil of the British leaving India was not just compounded with but overshadowed by the trauma of the partition.

Partition discourse has been dominated by two dominant interpretations of the violence. According to the 'nationalist' interpretation, the violence is metaphorically understood to be the birth-pangs of the two nations. Critiquing this often-used metaphor for partition as birth pangs of the two nations, historians such as Suvir Kaul has argued that this construction of all nations being necessarily born through violence tries to find a sacrificial logic, making the guilt less onerous and legitimising militarism and war.³⁰ In Rajan's representation of the crisis, the appropriation of the figure of Nataraj leads to the sacrificial symbolism of a kind where the causes of and responsibility for the violence are silenced through phrases such as 'temporary madness', and the whole partition tragedy becomes diluted into a rhetoric of martyrdom and sacrifice.³¹ Thus, the mythic symbolism of the Nataraj here paradoxically pulls against the political complexity of the situation. The ancient Tamil folk vision that 'for something to be born, something must die' constructs the violence of partition almost necessary. We do not know how much Rajan was aware of the complexities of such engagement but given his nationalist bent, it seems that he is harking on Congresses' description of the partition.

²⁸Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p. 417.

²⁹Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, p. 2.

³⁰Suvir Kaul, 'Introduction', in Suvir Kaul ed., *The Partitions of Memory: the Afterlife of the divisions of India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), pp. 1-29.

³¹Tarun K. Saint, *Witnessing Partition: Memory, History, Fiction* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), p. 105.

Later, the image also translates into the symbol of destruction accompanying the partition riots. Krishnan moves to Delhi only to discover the impending threat. The partition was in the air of Delhi, and everyone knew what it was. The streets of Delhi, the novel suggests, were not filled with hope or jubilation. The people were coming and going on the streets as if nothing was going to change. It was on June 3, 1947, that Krishnan invited his friends Vijayraghvan, Cynthia and others for dinner at his home. The date in itself is significant as it was on this day that the date of 15th of August was announced, both as the day of freedom and of partition. Krishnan anticipates the mayhem as he turns to the calendar and counts “seventy-two days” to the red-letter day. Krishnan, being a bureaucrat serving in Delhi at a time when things were changing fast, apprehended the flaw and considered the early transfer of power a catastrophe. His ideas were more in tune with senior officials in India, like the Punjab governor and the Commander-in-chief, who were averse to any hurry in the transfer of power and demanded at least a year for peaceful division of the country. In the absence of any such assurance, the dark dancer appears to him in all its ominous foreboding.

The violence of partition coincides with a moment of great personal upheaval in the life of Krishnan. He leaves Kamala for Cynthia, only to be abandoned by Cynthia after a short period. Krishnan then desperately seeks for Kamala and finds that she has gone to the West Punjab district of Shantipur to save women and children. He decides to pursue her in a bid to win her back and embarks on a dangerous journey to the Punjab that vividly captures the violence and menace threatening the country. The sections of the novel set in the train journey and the Shantipur convey the misery, desperation and degradation that followed the large-scale migration and the limited relief that newly formed nation states could offer to its dislocated citizens. During his train journey, Krishnan again has a vision of Nataraj:

The blaze of reproach was coming in through the window, tapping the base of his brain, forming and reforming the kaleidoscope of error.

‘He went back, counting the milestones. But who could first tell when the beginning ruptured, if the first flaw lay in action or in thought, or if there was no cause at all, but only an endless condition, the circle of flames in which the dancer vaulted, the destruction glittering from the eye of his light. Perhaps there was only disappointment to reach, since the will was born in the body, striking from it, and, whatever distance of serenity the will strove to, had to be held and maimed by the dark flesh.

[...] The leap of the dancer rang through every temple. Was it evil alone, the demon, that the foot trampled, or was the macabre energy indifferent, choosing nothing but the pure circle of form? Did the soothing of the image only mean that cruelty lived and one had always to live with it? Was that the condition of a man’s life, his Karma, the cost of the truth, the toll of being human? Was that the prison from which no one could escape, the body of the mind so much more treacherous than the other body with its simpler temptations?³²

Politics, philosophy, religion and personal crisis are knit together through the image of ‘leap of the dancer’ through the circle of flames: are these the flames of repentance on the part of Krishnan, or is this the blaze of communal violence and mob fury ripping apart the land or is it, going beyond both of them, a commentary on ‘the cost of truth, the toll of being human’? If Milton, as Shelley claimed, was on the devil’s side without knowing it, as he gave vent to his own revolutionary ideas by going back to the fall of man, does here Rajan at once follow and invert his favorite writer by investing contemporary historical violence with mythological symbolism and a terrible beauty, on a cosmic scale? For many, the 15th of August 1947 was

³²Rajan, p. 181-182.

the complete reversal of the dream of freedom. For countless Muslims in India and Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan, the partition was a cruel choice between leaving what they had known as home or risking communal violence and death; even today, seventy years after the Partition, people are still coming to terms with the trauma of having to leave their homes and land without any warning, in boats, trains and carts, leaving behind everything they had counted as precious. The partition of 1947, argues Gyanendra Pandey 'drastically changed the constitutional, political, and social condition of both north-eastern and north-western India'.³³ Punjab, to where Krishnan now journeys, was one of the epicenters of violence, as Rajan combines the turmoil within with the upheaval outside. At a simple level, in political terms, Rajan invokes the image of the glittering eyes of the dark dancer to at once record the trauma and question its origins. Folk mythology is here galvanised to record what Gyanendra Pandey has called 'a moment of rupture' - and more. The train journey that Krishnan undertakes is a tumultuous journey through a landscape that is at once historical, emotional and spiritual - and it is the metaphor of the 'dancer in the flame' with its intensities of meaning that hold together these separate realms. Rajan evolves the historical fact of political destruction to a metaphysical questioning of the roots of violence and evil, just as Sigmund Freud had done in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1922) just after the bloodshed of the First World War, with his thesis about the death-drive. But Rajan's image is religious: going back to a primal moment of violence in Hindu mythology - the dance of Nataraj - he evolves historical violence to a spiritual dilemma, about karma. In the process, there is a certain expansion in scope - from the political to the metaphysical - but also a certain sanitisation as the specificity of the violence is lost before the philosophical thesis.³⁴

³³ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, p. 1.

³⁴ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, p. 1.

At the same time, coursing through the extract is a reminder of the too solid flesh. It is not only the violence of partition that petrifies Krishnan but also the conflicts in his personal life. He was hoping to meet Kamala and, while doing so, contemplates on the 'body' as the site of desire. The overemphasis on the 'body' in the passage refers to the kind of passion he had felt for Cynthia and the manner in which it had complicated his life. He now wants to subdue 'the dark flesh' and hopes for a joyous though sexually restrained relationship with his ex-wife. Rajan, here, invokes Gandhian notions of bodily and sexual restraint. Gandhi had famously professed importance of a celibate married life and advised his followers to maim their body, and restrain themselves from a highly sexualised conjugal life.³⁵ Adhering to the advice of Mahatma, many Gandhians such as Sucheta Kriplani had famously vowed for a married life.³⁶ Rajan similarly envisions a married yet celibate future between Krishnan and Kamala.

As Krishnan arrives in Shantipur, Kamala accepts him without asking. He joins her in serving the refugees in the camp. Kamala, along with Krishnan, fights for the cholera-affected Muslims and tries to cure them. But the frenzied crowd relentlessly tries to disrupt their efforts, and, in the end, a riot again breaks out at Shantipur. At every crucial moment, the image of the dancer appears: 'He thought of the avalanche outside, the white tents waiting for the dancer's foot to trample'. The image, later, returns in a more personal key to mark the final separation of the couple:

³⁵ Please see Ketu Kartak, 395-96, 'Indian Nationalism, Gandhian 'Satyagrah,' and Representations of Female Sexuality', in Andrew Parker ed., *Nationalism and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge), pp. 395-406. Caplan, 'Celibacy as a Solution? Mahatma Gandhi and Brahmacharya,' in Pat Caplan ed., *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality* (London: Tavistock, 1987), pp. 271-93. Also see Joseph Alter, *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2000).

³⁶ Born in Ambala in 1908, Sucheta Mazumdar Kriplani was the daughter of S.N.Mazumdar, a medical officer in the Punjab Medical Services. She did her masters at St. Stephen's College, Delhi and later became a lecturer at Banaras Hindu University. A long-time follower of Gandhi, Sucheta married another Gandhian Acharya Kriplani in 1936 in a much publicised celibate marriage. She later moved to Allahabad and in 1940 was chosen to organise a women's department of the Indian National Congress. For more details please see Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, pp. 207-8.

It was at the wedding feast, amid the bangles and tinsel, the mendicant dreams and the brocaded gossip, when the voice of the singer glissaded, the dancer leaped, and he felt the lurch, the nausea almost, of an absolute loneliness and the abrupt recovery, the sensation of a seed planted, without his knowing what germ it contained, or what demands its darkness would grow into. It had begun then and this has to be the end of it.

[...]The haze flooded in, with the man's body big as all darkness, crushing the pouring edge of it, and through the haze he saw Kamala not simply standing fast but thrusting erectly ... Then the crimson stain welled over her rigid breasts and the serenity came back, her hair cascading into a deeper blackness, till the darkness reached out where her eyes could see him no longer.³⁷

The voice of the singer reappears. In a moment of flashback, Krishnan hears the song sung at his wedding. There, it marked the beginning; the song now returns to signal the end. Krishnan senses that something ominous is going to happen but still reluctantly obeys Kamala. In the night, when the roads are empty, they decide to take a walk. In the middle of their walk, they see two hooligans chasing a single woman. Kamala moves forward to protect her, but falls prey to the violence. As she dies, there is a simultaneous cessation of violence: sacrifice embodied in the figure of Kamala then becomes a mode of restoring peace.

J. C. Heesterman has argued that in Tamil myth, as elsewhere, 'sacrifice is made to redirect the primordial urges at a chosen victim so as to provide the community with a regularised channel that saves it from total collapse through internecine strife'.³⁸ Similarly, while analysing the importance of war sacrifice in the Tamil world view, David Schulman argues that, in the myths popular in this region, 'the sacrifice produces new life—the divine

³⁷Rajan, p. 283.

³⁸J. C. Heesterman, *The Broken World of Sacrifice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 8. There are similar tales in Western literature, going back right into examples in Greek plays, such as the sacrificial death of Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon.

seed—from the disintegration’.³⁹ Ancient Tamils, therefore, celebrated war and considered a battle-field filled with death and horror as one of the manifestations of the divine, who is worshipped in the form of Nataraj.⁴⁰ Kamala, at the centre of the circle of flames, becomes the chosen victim, at once the dancer and the dance wrap up in the flame of sacrifice. S. C. Harrex, therefore, rightly argues that the significance of the dark dancer ‘lies in the lyrical elegy of the central paradox, whereby the sacrifice of Kamala encapsulates the enigmatic complexity of birth and death, union and separation’.⁴¹ In constructing her death not just as the cost of violence but rather marking its cessation, the plot of the novel follows the primordial logic of the folktale which celebrates the death of a sacrificial victim as the price for a new beginning. Though the symbolism may be rich, the politics is rather insidious: it ultimately legitimises war and dignifies the traumatic effect of personal loss through a nationalist as well as a transcendental version of “honour” and “sacrifice”.⁴²

Even at the personal level, Kamala’s sacrifice is constructed as redemptive, for she, in many ways, saves Krishnan: he finally realises the value of Kamala and sees the ‘truth’. Krishnan finally separates from Kamala; ironically the true union lies in this separation. The end is the new beginning. He refuses to marry Cynthia and decides to live his life alone with the adopted son of Kamala. He recalls Krishna’s words to Arjuna in *BhagvadGita* as Krishna blends into Krishnan. Kamala, through her sacrifice, initiates him into the devotional path. It is this complex representation of Kamala that I will now go on to discuss. She is at first shown as an obedient wife but gradually, through the novel, gains in power, courage and dignity, particularly after her banishment. Her transformation is one of the most fascinating

³⁹ David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 347.

⁴⁰ Please see David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*.

⁴¹ S.C.Harrex, ‘Dancing in the Dark: BalachandraRajan and T.S.Eliot’, *World Literature Written in English*, 14 (1975), 310-21 (p. 320).

⁴² Ananya Jahanara Kabir, ‘Subjectivities, Memories, Loss: Of Pigskin Bags, Silver Spittons and the Partition of India’, *Interventions: Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 4 (2002), 245-64 (p. 250).

features of the novel and resonates with a Tamil folk *Purana*. However, before investigating the intertextual links, it is important to understand the image of Sita in the South Indian folklore.

Sita in the South Indian folklore

Figure 5.1 Rama and Sita with Lord Hanuman and Laxman. Courtesy British Library

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In South India, the *Ramayana* story is very important. The various cities of this region are associated with the story, and so it finds an unusual connection with the people.⁴³ The Kingdom of Lanka, over which Ravana rules in the story, has long been linked with South India or Ceylon, today Sri Lanka. Since the fourteenth century, the Vijayanagar area in today's Karnataka state has been identified as the site of the capital of Kishkindha, the monkey Kingdom in *Ramkatha*. In addition, Rama is said to have amassed his army at Rameshvaran, the well-known pilgrim city at the South-eastern edge of what is today's Tamilnadu, directly across the straits from Sri Lanka.⁴⁴

⁴³ See Paula Richman, ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁴⁴ Sri Lanka is country in South Asia.

Owing to its popularity, many writers have adapted the Valmiki text and have retold the story. The earliest major adaptation in South India is the Kamban's Tamil *Iramavataram*, which follows Valmiki's plot closely and Kamban openly acknowledges his debt to Valmiki. Kamban's *Iramavataram* has long been seen as a quintessentially Tamil telling of *Ramkatha*. The Kamban's *Ramayana* more or less sticks to the caste and gender hierarchies of the Valmiki text. One of the first retellings of *Ramkatha* to provide an explicit and trenchant critique of gender and caste hierarchy was written by Malayalam scholar Kumaran Asan. Kumudini, a Gandhian, later followed him. She retold the text according to her interpretation, employing the Gandhian motif of spinning.⁴⁵ Many of these tellings invert the image of Sita and critique the idea of dharma or duty.⁴⁶ It is the reversal of the image of Sita that this section proposes to examine. I will investigate the construction of folk Sita in South India, and then in the next section I will go on to show the inter-textual links between Kamala and folk Sita.

The epic *Ramayana* gets (re)written, orally recited and performed in various languages of South and South-East Asia. Each telling or performance is unique. At times, a new telling adds new episodes or minor characters to the epic story. Sometimes a single language records multiple versions: Sanskrit itself contains twenty-five tellings of the Rama story. Displaying the abundance of the Rama story, a popular folktale is coined in South India that says that

⁴⁵ Paula Richman, 'Sartorial Dilemmas' in Paula Richman, ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 45-49. Ranganayaki Thatham (1905-1986) wrote regularly for Tamil magazines in the 1930s and 1940s under the pseudonym of "Kumudini". A follower of Gandhi, she shocked neighbours by wearing *Khadi* even to weddings.

⁴⁶ To read about Sita in detail please see Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and Lynn Thomas ed., *Playing for Real: Hindu Role Models, Religion, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). R. P. Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 'S.J. "Ramayana"', in Sushil Mittal and Gene Truby ed., *The Hindu World* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 75-96. Herman Jacobi, *The Rāmāyana; Das Rāmāyana of Herman Jacobi* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960). Mandakranta Bose ed., *The Ramayana Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

‘for every Rama, there is a *Ramayana*’.⁴⁷ But the presence of the multiple variants or tellings of the episode creates complex questions for the ethnographers and the anthropologists. Many of them have tried to discover the variations, interpretations and localisations of the legend during the course of the re-telling or translation.

Paula Richman, through an extensive study of the tradition of the *Rama Katha* story-telling, divides the tradition into three categories—the Sanskrit telling of the text, Regional language devotional texts, and the folk telling.⁴⁸ Among the Sanskrit telling, the most prestigious, influential, and authoritative version of the story is the *Valmiki Ramayana*. Besides being in Sanskrit, the text has gained its towering status because of its antiquity; most authors date its compilation to ca. 500 BCE-250 CE. The devotees consider the text as the primal story; scholars consider it as the fundamental manuscript; and writers respect it for its literary worth.⁴⁹ Such veneration has won the *Valmiki Ramayana* its pre-eminent historical, religious, and aesthetic authority. But the text, as Richman argues, ‘urges adherence to brahminically defined dharma—even at great social or personal cost’.⁵⁰ Indeed, Valmiki throughout his text emphasises performing one’s assigned duties, including those of spouse, parent, the elder brother, lineage, jati (sub-caste), varna, master, ruler, and Kingdom.⁵¹ The text, therefore, is quite popular among high-class elites, who often championed the text and

⁴⁷ A.K. Ramanujan, ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’, in Vinay Dharwadker ed., *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 131-160 (p. 133).

⁴⁸ Paula Richman, ‘Introduction’, in Paula Richman ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 1-36 (p. 8).

⁴⁹ Paula Richman, ‘Introduction’, in Paula Richman ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Paula Richman, *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, p. 9.

⁵¹ Valmiki’s *Ramayana* is the most authoritative telling of Ramkatha in India. The phrase “authoritative telling of Ramkatha” refers to texts that share three characteristics. First, they espouse normative ideologies of ranked social hierarchy. Second, they are influential beyond the temporal and geographical context in which they were written, continuing to be respected, studied, and transmitted centuries after their composition. Third, they have gained recognition as privileged texts. Although Valmiki’s *Ramayana* is the most famous and influential “authoritative telling”, at least two others are generally recognized as authoritative: the Hindi *Ramcharitmas* of Tulsidas, and Kamban’s Tamil *Iramavataram*.

supported its recitation. The telling of Ramakatha in regional languages is mostly devotional. The *bhakti* poets celebrate the various episodes with exuberance and recall the events with love. Folk telling that forms the third category of the Ramakatha tradition is more “fluid” than other categories. Richman argues that ‘the folk telling provides more scope for improvisation than do fixed texts, allowing the narrative to be customised according to the predilections of story-tellers and preferences of the listeners’.⁵²

The ethnographers have recorded a large number of the folk renditions, and the wide variation in the episodes is quite extraordinary. The tellings of the various episodes in the epic varies widely from locality to locality—sometimes even from village to village. The folk renditions mostly include the point-of-view of the women and the lower-caste men and are sometimes openly transgressive. They provide non-authoritarian perspectives, including those of lesser-known characters, in their accounts. Thus, while the orthodox group of men in India portray Sita as a quintessential Hindu wife who accepts the pain of exile and goes happily to the forest for the love of her husband, the folklore, as Richman argues, ‘draws on the humanity of Sita’.⁵³ The folk songs, in particular, depict her as a resourceful survivor rather than a hapless victim. She acts according to her will and learns from situations and acquires the ability to adapt and improvise. Such narrative strategy thus portrays ‘Sita as someone with an “agency”’.⁵⁴ For instance, a Telugu song called “Sita Locked Out” focuses on an interesting episode in the married life of Rama and Sita:

She is born of Earth, and raised by Janak.
Her loving husband calls her, but she doesn’t come.
Flowers in his hair, fragrance on his body, her husband is in a joyous mood.

⁵² Paula Richman ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, p. 11.

⁵³ Paula Richman, ‘Introduction’, in Paula Richman ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Paula Richman, ‘Introduction’, in Paula Richman ed., *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*, p. 27.

Looking for her, he waits and waits.⁵⁵

In the story, Rama is in a joyous mood and is awaiting Sita in his room. Sita, though, defies her husband and keeps on talking with her in-laws. Rama gets angry, and he locks the door from inside and refuses to open it. Sita cleverly resolves the situation by calling on her mother-in-law, who reprimands Rama for his act. The episode thus foregrounds the goddess/heroine as an ordinary woman and describes her intelligence in handling domestic issues. The most powerful representation of Sita, however, is seen in a folk Purana popular in the Tamil region.⁵⁶ In the folk Purana, the figure of Sita changes from the benign goddess Lakshmi to the ferocious Kali. She herself goes out in the battle field to fight a powerful demon and returns victorious. I will now briefly examine the Tamil folk Purana and then go on to investigate its links with the novel.

⁵⁵“Sita Gadiya” [Sita Locked Out], in “Krishnasri” in Sripada Gopala Krishnamurthi, ed., *Strila Ramayanapu Patula* [Women’s Ramayana Songs], (Hyderabad: Andhra Sarasvata Parishattu, 1955), p. 105-106. “Sita Locked Out,” a Telugu song sung by Brahmin women in Andhra, focuses upon an unusual set of events in the married life of Rama and Sita. This song shares some features with a genre of folksongs that are meant to be performed at the door of the house. Such songs are popular at weddings in the Andhra region, but those “open the door” songs depict the husband locked out by the wife, whereas the roles are reversed in the song translated here. In a series of strategically orchestrated sections, the song depicts how Sita extricates herself from a difficult situation, establishes solidarity with her mother-in-law, and enjoys Rama’s intimate attention.

⁵⁶ David Schulman, ‘Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions’, in A. K. Ramanujan and Stuart Blackburn ed., *Another Harmony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 105-30.

Figure 5.2 *Kali*, place of creation, Kolkata c.1870 courtesy Ashmolean Library,
University of Oxford (Image removed due to copy right Issues)

Catakantaravan Katai, first published in 1928, is a Tamil prose narrative that outlines the battle between Sita and the demon *Satakantharavan*.⁵⁷ The story begins after the killing of Ravana and the arrival of Rama and Sita in Ajodhya. The episode is unknown to the Valmiki *Ramayana* but is preserved in the local folk tradition. The folk Purana that I analyse is a printed version but is anonymous. In addition, the style of the text is literary, but as Schulman claims, it has a marked tendency to break into more popular idioms and images.⁵⁸ The form of the text is also literary, but its narrative, Schulman argues, ‘is more closely allied to oral prose tradition’.⁵⁹ In many ways, the narrative style is analogous to Tamil *Harikatha* narratives. The tale is widely known in South India and is circulated in prose and poetry. The *Yakshgana* in Karnataka also dramatises the episode. The Telugu language preserves the poetic version of the story and is the source of the prose version.

⁵⁷ For the readers who don’t know the story of Ramayana, here is the brief summary. The narrative records the union and separation of Rama and Sita. After marriage, Sita comes to Ajodhya along with her husband, but soon they depart to forest. Rama’s step-mother asks his father King Dasrath to grant exile to his beloved son. With heavy heart he orders Rama’s departure. However, Sita and Lakshman, younger brother of Rama accompanied him. On the way, Ravana kidnaps Sita and takes her to Lanka. Rama and Lakshman along with the monkey army defeats Ravana and unites with Sita.

⁵⁸ David Schulman, ‘Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions’, p. 106.

⁵⁹ Schulman, ‘Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions’, p. 106.

The episode, where Sita argues with Rama shows a significant reversal of the image of Sita, where she remains an obedient wife, but still argues with her husband for her beliefs, and even when Rama advises her not to fight with the demon, she goes out into the battle and kills her powerful male enemy. The battle-scenes between Sita and the demon reflect the furious battle recorded in the South Indian village cults. In the Valmiki *Ramayana*, too, there are moments where the poet celebrates Sita's anger. But, on the whole, if her fury remains inhibited in the classical epic, in the folk versions, her status of Sita is radically reversed, as she is transformed into a powerful Tamil village goddess. A passage from the text, originally translated by Schulman, records the symbolic significance of this extraordinary inversion:

Then Srirammurti looked at Citadevi and, highly pleased abandoned the sea of sorrow, smiled and said: "Listen, Lady Sita. Because you are a woman, you do not know the tricks (mayaki) of the Raksasas. [sic]

To this Sita replies:

"Beloved husband! Dear Companion! Lord! When that Ravana captured me and kept me for ten months in the Ashoka grove, I did not tremble in fear of him. I see with the eye of wisdom; if you give me your servant permission, I will kill that Rakshasa Catakantan.'

Then Ramamurti knew, by the eye of wisdom, that Sita would conquer the Rakshasa; she knew what she was saying.⁶⁰

The passage quoted above, in many ways deviates from the classical *Ramayana*. Schulman, hence, refers to the directness and colourfulness of the dialogue between the couple. Rama questions Sita's ability, and orders Sita not to fight with the demon. Still, Sita argues and goes out into the battle to save her Kingdom. She asserts that she is capable of

⁶⁰ David Schulman, 'Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions', p. 109.

killing the demon and that she can see the fate of the battle with her inner eye. Rama, too, acknowledges her power and foresees 'she knew what she was saying'. She later turns to Rama with several requests: that no obstacle should interfere with her success and that Rama bestows upon her his bow, his quiver and his magic arrow. Rama accepts her requests and instructs her in the use of the *mantras* which accompany his weapon. Sita then asks the Kings who have assembled to help her: 'I have sworn to kill this *Rakshasa*. You must not use your weapons or come on to the field of battle. Watch the fight from the *Vimana*'.⁶¹ Such statements are not found in the classical versions of the epic. The folk Purana successfully subverts the conventional image of Sita as the subdued heroine of the legendary epic. And it is this brave warrior Sita of the folk Purana that deeply resonates with Rajan's creation of Kamala of the novel.

Kamala as folk Sita

In the novel, Kamala is first shown as an obedient Hindu wife, who later defies social norms. The significance of inversion lies in the dual vision of the woman in Hinduism. In the Hindu worldview, a woman is both fertile, a benevolent bestower as well as aggressive malevolent destroyer. In the Hindu cosmology, in fact, the universal substratum *brahman*

⁶¹ David Schulman, 'Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions', p. 109.

rests upon *Sakti* (power; the female form of divinity). *Sakti* is female, and all the power in the Hindu world rests on her. At the same time, a woman is also connected to *prakriti* (Nature). The women are, therefore, ‘associated with soil into which man puts his seed’.⁶² The image of the field symbolises a second facet of femaleness: woman is *prakriti*. In Hinduism these two facets of femininity, energy/power and nature are joined together. Susan Wadley argues that the woman is therefore considered very powerful, something that needs to be controlled.⁶³ Thus, women are to be kept under the control of men at all stages of their lives.⁶⁴ It is against this patriarchal backdrop that the rules and role models are constructed for the Hindu women. The traditional brahminical system considers the marriage of a young girl a mandatory act. The Hindu law books (*Dharmasatra*) construct rules for a married woman. A girl is supposed to follow them soon after puberty. The image of Sita in the classical text is at the centre of this construct. But in the folk *Purana* that I have quoted above, Sita the ideal wife changes into ferocious Kali and kills the demon. In the novel too, Kamala changes from an ideal wife (Sita) to a ferocious Kali. It is within these contexts that I will examine the connection between Kamala and folk Sita. I will trace her journey from a traditional Brahmin family in Madras to the battle grounds of Punjab.

The earth, fire and sacrifice are features that are associated with the epic character of Sita.⁶⁵ Rajan at various stages of the novel shows Kamala’s association with earth and fire, which paradoxically also lead to her sacrifice. The narrator introduces Kamala with some

⁶² Doranne Jacobson and Susan Wadley, *Women in India: Two Perspectives* (Columbia: South Asia Books, 1977), p. 117.

⁶³ Doranne Jacobson and Susan Wadley, *Women in India: Two Perspectives*, p. 117.

⁶⁴ Rules for Proper conduct are explicitly laid down in Hindu law books, collectively known as the *Dharmasastras* (the Rules of Right Conduct). Mythology, written and oral, in Sanskrit and in the vernaculars, provides many examples of female behaviour and its consequences, thus setting up explicit role models for the Hindu woman. The basic rules from women’s behaviour are as follows: “In a childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; women must never be independent.” G.Buhler (trans.), *The Laws of Manu, Sacred Books of the East*, vol.xxv, (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1964), p. 195-97.

⁶⁵ See David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 67.

apprehension. He visits his house to select her as his bride. His mother had finalised two girls, and he had to select between them. Earlier he was introduced to Menaka, and with her he would have found some tranquility. With Kamala though there was no tranquility, and her eyes declared that the relationship would be contested. Kamala is an educated woman and shows inner strength. She is not passive but receptive, as Krishnan puts it. She succumbs to traditional patriarchal tradition, but not before questioning it:

Kamala looked at him out of the corners of her eyes. She had exchanged no glances with him, her reason being a scholar in Sanskrit and so of understanding only too clearly the unprogressive elements in the ritual. When Krishnan put the marriage yoke against her and with blithe of ignorance declared, “with this I beckon thee to my dominion,” she was aware of some strain upon her self-esteem. “The man is the image and glory of God, but woman the image and the glory of man.” “He for God only, she for God in him.” [sic] She had flung the phrases from St. Paul and *Paradise Lost* priggishly at the Mother Superior in the mission convent, whenever the latter spoke to her about the inferior position of Indian Womanhood. How about she who led the Rajput armies? How about they who were in the vanguard of civil disobedience?

[...] After all there was logic in an arranged marriage, none of these illusions of romantic love; two people came together till the fire died in its ashes, and they were successful because success was perfectly normal if one brought good will and the desire to understand into the relations of any two human beings.

[...] They took the seven steps round the fire, she knowing, as he did not, that the ceremony was over and that the same fire which was their witness would burn in their

home, witness to every consequence, everlasting, inescapably, *the fire of unity and of Sita's ordeal* (emphasis mine).⁶⁶

In this passage, there is a complex representation of Kamala. She is compared to Sita as in 'the fire of unity and of Sita's ordeal'. However, she is not passive in her acceptance of her gendered role. A Sanskrit scholar, she understands the words uttered and the significance of every ritual. With every passing ceremony, she realises that she is losing her identity. A strange man is taking her over, and as soon as vermillion is marked on her parted hair, she acknowledges that she is now under a male who is supposed to be superior to her in every respect. The ritual once again goes on to establish the man as image and glory of god and demeans woman as the image of and glory of man. Within her heart she resents and recalls her discussion with her Mother Superior at school. She recalls Rani Laxmibai as well as the women participating in the civil disobedience. Yet, in spite of all this knowledge, she is shown to accept her destiny without any rebellion. If Rajan does not present us at first with a radical female figure, he does subtly plant all the seeds for her subsequent growth.

At this point in the narrative, however, Kamala becomes a representative of Gandhi's version of womanhood in India. She is compared to Sita when the narrator invokes the fire ritual for Kamala during her wedding. The image of Sita in the early twentieth century was appropriated to devise a paradoxical model of femininity that was at once anti-colonial and patriarchal: it was made to protest against the British colonialism but at the same time place restriction on the female participants, advising them to adhere to their household duties. As stated in the preceding chapters, Gandhi held meetings with women's social groups to emphasise the traditional image of Sita as a perfect wife. Rajan here, like Rao, falls back on a patriarchal-nationalist validation of femininity. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Savithri was the

⁶⁶Rajan, pp. 31-32.

classic embodiment of the model for Indian womanhood produced during the early twentieth century that envisaged a highly conservative view of Indian femininity. Women were ‘educated enough to appreciate the modern regulations of the body, yet modest enough to be unselfish and unself-assertive’.⁶⁷ If Rao appropriates the image of Savithri to endorse the patriarchal image of woman as subservient to man, Rajan harps on the Sita myth to construct an ambivalent image of Kamala. She is shown to be educated enough to appreciate the modern regulation of the body, but is modest enough to be unselfish and unassertive. At this point in the narrative, the gender politics is highly disturbing. The passivity and subservience of Kamala, a graduate in Sanskrit, seems rather unconvincing. But while Rao transforms Savithri from a rebellious undergraduate to an obedient Hindu wife, Rajan transmutes Kamala from an obedient Tamil Brahmin house wife to a rather rebellious social worker.

After her marriage, Rajan shows her seclusion in the groom’s house, holding a bunch of keys at the waist of her sari. She is portrayed as lonely and isolated. Later, she, along with Vijayraghavan (a minor character and shy lover of Kamala) and Krishnan, visits Marina beach to hear an anti-British speech. In the midst of the event, Krishnan and Raghvan get embroiled in a violent fight. Kamala somehow protects Krishnan and brings him back home. Her devotion to Krishnan is commented upon by a spectator: ““Let us leave him now”, suggested Sankaran, “to the tender ministration of his devoted wife””. Rajan later goes on to compare Kamala and Cynthia. In their first meeting at a club in Delhi, Kamala is shown as a demure woman, whereas Cynthia is uninhibited. In a conversation with Krishnan, Cynthia calls Kamala an obedient Hindu wife who is trying to ‘fit in’ and blindly trots behind her husband. Krishnan, too, calls Kamala intensely “Indian”, and shows a sense of surprise at her subservience. He is drawn towards Cynthia and finds her “very attractive”, whereas,

⁶⁷Dipesh Chakaravarty, ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?’, p. 235.

Krishnan's relationship with Kamala is unconsummated and shows no sign of intimacy. The relationship between Krishnan and Kamala is emotional whereas the relationship between “Krish” and Cynthia is passionate.

The binary between the 'spiritual' Indian Kamala and the sexualised English Cynthia create highly reductive and rather perverse models of femininity that demeans both Indian and Western woman at multiple levels. The reforms in the nineteenth century generated the figure of the “new woman”, but as suggested in the preceding chapters, the new women were subjected to the new forms of patriarchy.⁶⁸ They were placed in contrast to the modern Western society and represented a classicized version of the Indian tradition. The construction and rejection of a dissolute “West”, often through the figure of the Western woman, was widely prevalent in the nationalist discourse, thus defying any easy conflation of nationalism with progressive gender politics, in spite of the participation of increasing number of women. Rajan initially seems to be here almost recycling this standard patriarchal and nationalist trope without any revision.

If Kamala is associated with fire, Krishnan goes on later to emphasise Kamala's association with earth too: “you are like earth ... “Sometimes the earth is fertile. Sometimes it has nothing to offer. But get away from it, and you abandon your strengths.” Schulman has argued that the goddess [Sita] in the Tamil myths represents the earth in its universal womb from which life issues, and to which life returns in violence.⁶⁹ But such Sitaification of Kamala only helps Krishnan to strip her of any shred of individuality or agency. He thinks that her life without him will be ‘worse than the widows. You have no status not that of age, not even that of honourable exile’.⁷⁰ The reader at this point does not know whether Rajan

⁶⁸ Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question’, p. 247.

⁶⁹ David Schulman, *Tamil Temple Myths*, p. 139.

⁷⁰ Rajan, p. 139.

here is aligning himself with Krishnan in voicing such conservative views, or whether in fact he is critiquing his protagonist: the plot will soon tell. However, the first break of Kamala with the classical image of Sita, and direct inter-textual link with the Sita of the folk Purana comes only after the separation of the couple. As soon as she hears Krishnan's decision, she decides to leave him. She neither resents nor regrets and walks away from his life silently. Her tranquility shocks Krishnan; her inner strength amazes the reader. When he declares, 'I can't go on staying with you Kamala,' she quietly responds, 'I don't expect you to.' In fact, the conversation between the two shows the extraordinary inversion:

"Of course, I shall make every possible provision for you. There is never going to be any question of hardship. The first claim on anything I earn will be that of your comfort."

"As you wish," she replied. "We have no children and I can earn my living."

She might have said it as something she was forced to. Or she might have said it as something she would have thought of doing anyway ... She simply said it calmly, yet with no particular effort at being collected, almost as if she were describing someone else.... He was shocked by her, shocked most of all by her poise which he was beginning to see could not be cultivated, now that the hard rock of her personality was evident.

He said, "Is there anything I can possibly do?"

Her answer was simple. "I can look after myself."⁷¹

Kamala, 'an obedient Hindu wife' flowers into a female character of singular inner resource and strength without a break of mediating pause as the classical Sita mutates into that of the Sita of the Purana. Like Sita of the folklore, she is shown to be an inspiration, not a burden, responding to the moment, standing her ground and asserting her pride, her dignity and above all her agency.

We see the initial sparks of this inner strength early in the novel, in the above-mentioned scene of altercation during the Quit India movement. Not only does she manage to save Krishnan, she remains adhered to the principles of non-violence. In many ways, Rajan here powerfully embeds her in the political movement, preparing us for her future development.

⁷¹Rajan, p. 146-7.

Geraldine Forbes argues that ‘in contrast to 1930, when women were asked to wait until men completed the march to Dandi, in 1942 women fought alongside men and suffered the same consequence’.⁷² There were two centres directing activities, both underground and both led by women. Aruna Asaf Ali, championing the revolutionary tactic, was one; Sucheta Kriplani, the forbearer of non-violence, the other. Rajan would have known of the Gandhian Kriplani, and might have even partly constructed Kamala after her. Soon after her separation from Krishnan, she rushes to the war-torn areas of Punjab to rescue women and children. It is this significant moment in the narrative that reveals Kamala’s closest association with the Sita of the folk Purana. She goes alone to the battlefield, and her righteous rage provides a counterpoint to the indifference and weakness of Krishnan, a civil servant to the hostile situation.

Rajan remains silent regarding her journey to the fatal district, but the personal accounts of various social workers allow us to understand her extraordinary journey from Delhi to the West-Punjab district of Shantipur. The well-known social worker Anis Kidwai narrates one such account in her memoir.⁷³ Kidwai’s husband, Shafi Ahmad Kidwai, was killed during the partition riots, and the bereaved Kidwai went to Gandhi for solace. Mahatma advised her to participate in the rescue and rehabilitation of the women refugees. Following the advice, Kidwai turned to social work and actively participated in rescuing Muslim women during the partition riots. Kamala would have joined the social work in a similar manner. She rushes to the epicentre of the battle to carry on the rescue operation. Exploring various life histories, Urvashi Butalia, in her famous work *The Other Side of the Silence* (1998), interviews woman social workers such as Damayanti Sehgal in order to understand at first hand the experiences

⁷² Please Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 209.

⁷³ Please see Anis Kidwai, *Azadi Ki Chaon Mein* (Hindi)(New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1990).

of a woman and how they finally came to terms with life.⁷⁴ The account of Sahgal is important not only in understanding the effect of violence on the female body but also shares warm memories of female solidarity.⁷⁵ The interview shares noteworthy moments, where one hears of the heroic deeds of some female workers. Such heroism constructs an alternative version of the partition history. The account explains the manner in which many women were recovered during the riots.⁷⁶ The social workers had to travel far and wide, at times facing enormous resistance from the local officers. They had to devise new methods to counter hostile behaviour. The life history of Sahgal also illustrates how the women who were 'rejected' by their families were allowed to move out of their inner household and 'make something of her life'.⁷⁷

Kamala, in the novel, similarly adopts the social work after her separation from Krishnan. She goes out into the battle-field alone, rescuing the affected people without referring to caste, community or religion. One such account celebrates the bravery of Sushila Nayar:

One day Sushila Nayar had come to the camp. She said come, I will come with you, where are these fields? Night was failing as we reached Okhla. But Sushila was fearless and unhesitant she walked, pushing her way through the bushes and fields. Sushila walked into the house without a trace of fear.⁷⁸

Towards the end of the novel, Kamala shows enormous courage and she transforms from a chaste and devoted wife to a ferocious Tamil goddess. Like Nayar, she rushes towards the danger without any fear:

⁷⁴Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India (p) Ltd., 1998), p. 146-47.

⁷⁵ She narrates that how she used to sell eggs in order to enter the houses where abducted women were kept.

⁷⁶ The recovery was at times also controversial and often the ruling of state imposed its verdicts on its subject.

⁷⁷ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, p. 146-7.

⁷⁸Anis Kidwai, *Azadi Ki Chaon Mein* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 1990), p. 131.

It was still some distance from the area of hostilities. The girl must have run a long way, which was what her two pursuers wanted her to do. They were loping behind her, not exerting themselves to cut down the intervening space, waiting for her to collapse to the ground exhausted ...Kamala's eyes flashed, her grip on Krishnan's hand tightened, and before he fully realised what was happening they were between the two pursuers and their quarry. ... The shorter man lashed at his (Krishnan's) face with the iron-tipped stave he was carrying. The other man kicked at him and as he twisted aside, hit him square and viciously in the strapped arm. He had to back off and Kamala stepped in, her eyes blazing, but less with a sense of pity for his predicament than with the force of determination driving her. She did not reason with the men, or appeal to them, or use any of the compelling resources of her gentleness. Her bearing was passionate as he had never known it, passionate as if all compromise had ended.

"You are not going to kill her," she declared, and even her voice was brilliant and ringing. "If you do, you will have to kill me first."⁷⁹

Decolonization in South Asia resulted in the creation of separate nations and this division led to the unprecedented violence. Woman and her body became central to this violence. Almost 75,000 women were raped and abducted during the period. Apart from rape, there were multiple kinds of violence afflicted on the female body—they were paraded naked, the bodies were tattooed in a bid to defile the so-called 'purity' of the race.

Rajan, similarly in this passage, emphasises the violence on women during the riots, and the phrases such as 'the girl must have run long way' and 'waiting for her to collapse' records the awful crime. At the same time, he also provides a glimpse into the manner in which

⁷⁹Rajan, p. 277.

women protected fellow women during the battle, creating new bonds of female intimacy.⁸⁰ Kamala aggressively carries out the rescue work and challenges the two men with her prowess: “you are not going to kill her,” she declares, and even her voice is brilliant and ringing.⁸¹ She later sacrifices her life for the honour and dignity of the girl.

Later, the ghee merchant who was responsible for creating disturbances that eventually led to the death of Kamala equates her with the goddess Kali. In the Hindu myth, the goddess is shown as a warrior as well as redeemer. The merchant concludes that Kamala as goddess Kali has started to haunt him and fears that ‘her minions will pursue him to the ends of the earth’. Later, out of fear, he plans to flee to the Himalayas but is advised to provide support to bereaved Krishnan and Kamala’s adopted son. To protect a girl, Kamala transforms into the ‘dark goddess’. Such symbolism inverts the image of Kamala, presenting an alternative view of Indian femininity. She, like folk Sita, argues for her beliefs, sacrificing her life to protect an unknown girl. However, it can be argued that Rajan seldom moves away from the Gandhian version of femininity: Kamala’s transformation is from an obedient wife to a protective mother, harking back on the familiar nationalist trope of motherhood rather than a genuinely transgressive character such as Narayan’s Rangi or even Ghose’s Myna. Thus, while she develops and shows strength and richness and courage, she is still very much shown to be operating within the nationalist-patriarchal economy, where her ‘sacrifice’ is shown to restore peace. Thus, her life, though ‘noble’, could ultimately be cut short and frittered away as the focus moves back to Krishnan. ‘I hope you have not missed the women in me’, Gandhi once wrote to Sarojini Naidu to emphasise his so-called ‘feminine’ approach

⁹⁵ Kamala resembles Sushila Nayar, Mridula Sarabhai, and others. Please see Aparna Basu, *Mridula Sarabhai: Rebel With a Cause* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). During the riots in Punjab, when communal frenzy was at its height, a respectable area of Lahore was attacked. Unmindful of the danger, Mridula rushed into the battle site to rescue woman. She walked alone into the area, made necessary arrangements and on her way back picked up a small child who was sitting in the middle of the road. Kamala, like Mridula, picks up an orphan child in the novel.

⁹⁶Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, p. 132.

to liberation.⁸² The idea of the sacrificing mother was central to this formation.⁸³ Kamala transforms from a wife through social worker into a mother protecting the nation from complete annihilation: it was during her stint as a social worker that her individuality, and the historicity of the novel, is fully evident, breaking out of the mould of gendered stereotypes.

Tamil folklore thus works in Rajan's novel at multiple levels, from the vision of the dancer leaping across the flames gathering within itself different intensities of meaning - personal, historical and philosophical. And yet, the use of mythological symbolism raises complex questions about the relationship between historical violence and fictional narrative: does myth, rather than adding depth and gravity, take away the specificity, materiality and immediacy of the historical crisis, even though it connects the personal and the political? The character of Kamala, on the other hand, shows a very different facet of folkloric adaptation, moving between or rather from one the classical version of Sita to that of the Puranas. And yet, even this more emancipated Sita of the folklore is constrained by the bounds of nationalist constructions of femininity and made to sacrifice herself at the altar of the nation. The complex set of relationships that therefore rises between folk mythology, nationalism and gender politics is far from simple. Rather than championing either true emancipation or any sort of radicalism, the mythic framework only helps to reestablish the status quo. Even though offering glimmers of hope through the flashes we are given into the inner recesses of Kamala's mind and her remarkable evolution, the conclusion of the novel can be said to legitimise patriarchal violence through the trope of the redemptive sacrifice of the woman, making impossible any simple correlation between folklore and progressive politics.

⁸² Quoted from Susie Tharu, 'Tracing Savithri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indian Anglian Literature', in Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid ed. *Recasting Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 254-268 (p. 263).

⁸³ Please see Susie Tharu, 'Tracing Savithri's Pedigree: Victorian Racism and the Image of Women in Indian Anglian Literature', p. 263.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by discussing a visit that I paid to Varanasi in September 2016.¹ The aim of this recent visit was partly to examine the status of folklore in contemporary India. Celebrated for its composite culture, famously called *ganga-jamunatehrib*, this area provides an interesting exploration into the world of classical and folk music. Many classical and folk singers, from Tulsidas to Bismillah Khan, have sought inspiration from the social-cultural milieu of this well-known region.² It was in search of this beauty that I travelled to the great old city of North India. Taking my cue from Philip Lutengendorf's famous work *The Life of a Text*, I searched for the folk singers who could easily blend folk with classical. But I could not find them. Instead, what I found prompted a rather different reflection on the state of the folk art in New India. My search began from the well-known *Sankatmochan* Temple. The temple is popular for its musical performances. At times one could find a band of singers singing the *manas* dohas. The day when I visited was cloudy and a dark magnificent cloud suggested a powerful downpour. So, when I reached the temple, the musicians had left. But still, I could find a *katha-vachak* (story-teller) at the Verandah of the beautiful building. The teller told me that I could visit *Ramapura* (which was on my list) and that I could find some singers in the lanes of that *Mohalla* (a Small Township in India). The rains indeed came, and the downpour was so powerful that I had to end the day's tour. In the morning, I arrived at Ramapura. As soon as I entered the lanes of the musical Mohalla, I began to hear the beautiful music ragas. The name plates were filled with the names of the famous local musicians. The sound of a *Sitar* in one corner and a *thumri* in another instantly introduced me into the world of music. I stepped into the house of a local classical singer who was teaching his students. I felt enchanted listening to the beautiful ragas (gp, mp, dh, ni, sa) and had a

¹ Varanasi is a city situated at the banks of the river *Ganges*.

² Sadly, city has recently become centre of politics.

long chat with the singer, but what I found was rather depressing in context of the contemporary state of the folk singers, even in a place like Banaras. He revealed to me that once these streets were filled with *gawaiyas* (untrained folk singers), but now they are lost. The tradition is declining and the marginalization of the folk culture is the reason behind this decline. I gave him a reference from Lutengendorf's work, where he shows how folk singers mixed *kajli* songs into their performance, creating a new oral experience. After listening to it, he showed me the photographs of his well-known ancestors who were well-versed in such art, and in collusion with some folk artists they used to do such experiments. But now, he said, it is lost. He told me to enter into the back lanes of his house and hoped that I could find some aged singers who could at least give me a glimpse of that world. He referred to one Mohan Mishra. I went into the house of the singer, but the aged man was reluctant to share any such anecdote. His son, however, told me to visit *Kabir Chowra*, a township area. He assured me that in the by-lanes of the place, where the famous poet Kabir was born, I could find someone. And he was right. I found in the lanes of Kabir Chowra an interesting folk singer named Guddu Hungama. The interaction with the folk singer and his eagerness to show his art revealed the hidden but real hard state of the folk art.

I came to know that he is a popular folk artist who not only sings songs but also performs. He told me that he has also done some minor roles in the Hindi films, such as *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2007), and that he has connections in the Hindi film Industry. But the condition of the house and his situation seemed to suggest something else. He was desperate to show his art to anyone and when he found that I had come to interview him, he seemed more than delighted. He at once began to sing songs. He brought his *dholak* (a musical instrument) and started playing a *kajli* song sung in praise of Shiva:

Shivajidulha bane chaleapnesasural,
Sasuralchalena, sasuralchalena

Chalehimgirikedwar, parchan aye sab nar,
Parchanayi sab nar, parchanayi sab nar,
Sang bhutwonkelekeaparchalena

Shivaji decorated as groom is heading to his in-laws' house,
His in-laws' house, his in-laws' house,
When he arrives at the gate of Himgiri, women come to greet,
Women come to greet, women come to greet,
Taking together the army of Ghosts, he goes to his in-laws' house. (My translation)

The mood of the song was bawdy, reflecting the domestication of the Shiva in the folk literature. Hungamma went on singing other folk songs. After a while he introduced me to his family. His wife, though, felt embarrassed. The mother was standing at a corner. She too felt shy. His father was a clerk and now retired. He went over to his mother and told with pleasure that she is a housewife, adding that 'she keeps house together'. To this his mother quipped saying, 'aur tum dholakiya ho' (And you are a dholakiya). The sarcasm in the tone of the mother was biting. Such critique by the mother provides an interesting commentary on the marginalization of folklore in South Asia: the profession of a folk singer brings embarrassment to the family. Also, while the art of the trained classical singers is acknowledged, that of the folk performers remains unacknowledged. After this encounter, I went to *Dashashumedh* Ghat to find folk singers.³ During the early years of the twenty-first century, a host of singers used to sing songs on their boats while taking the tourists to different Ghats. But now I was told that there are few such singers. I felt sad. While folklore is now being reinstated as a subject of scholarship, in practice it is becoming extinct. At last, the *kirtan* at a nearby ghat filled the air. The women singers, as I have discussed in the fourth chapter, were often banned on account of their supposedly foul or erotic language. After decolonization, such banishment did not recur but they are even more marginalised now.

This is surprising because, since Independence, the Government of India has patronised various genres of folklore. For instance, the *Sangeet Natak Academy* (SNA; Academy of

³ It is the name of a famous bankside in Varanasi.

Music, Dance, Song, and Drama) in New Delhi, and its satellites in each state, conduct field research and sponsors the annual Republic Day parade in New Delhi to which folk artists are invited from each state.⁴ It also publishes books and a journal, designates a certain time-slot on the state-controlled national and local television and radio networks for folk and folkloric genres, and presents national awards for leading figures in the field, including performers and scholars. The *Lok Virsa* Institute for Folk Heritage in Islamabad, Pakistan, fulfils a similar function and also issues cassette and video recordings of folk music. However, in spite of government patronage, various genres of folklore are vanishing. In a BBC report published on 29 May 2016, Soumya Sankar, through various photographs, reflected on the declining status of *jatra* in Bengal.⁵ He concluded that the *jatra* artists were struggling to survive because of the decrease in number of the audiences. The situation became evident during my stay in Varanasi. One wonders about the multiple causes of such marginalization, which need to be studied against the broader histories of caste as well as class and gender politics, one that unfortunately goes back, as Susan Bayle has powerfully argued, to the nineteenth century.⁶ According to this argument, the British government during the early nineteenth century incorporated the caste-system into its own ideology, particularly through the theory of martial races.⁷

Interestingly, my artist included in the field work declined to reveal his caste. His conscious avoidance of issues of caste and the adoption of an absurd title of Hungama,

⁴ Amy Catlin, 'Folk Music', p. 210.

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india->.

⁶ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, p. 4.

⁷ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*, p. 4.

translated as 'chaos', 'strife' 'noise' in English, shows the resistance from within. His upper-caste family was embarrassed by his profession.⁸

Such tensions made me realise a central paradox in the five writers I have studied. These were largely upper or upper-middle educated male authors who were trying to re-invent folk material through their representation. Many of them were Brahmins by origin. Some, such as Raja Rao, were deeply embedded in the regressive traditional brahminical Puritanism; yet interestingly, they fall back on the not-so- "revered" folklore through the pressure of childhood memory and the possibilities folklore opens up to experiment with the form of the novel. While doing so, the writers are usually acutely aware of the historical and political context in which they are writing. The twinning of aesthetic and political agendas stretch from the novels of Raja Rao, from his combination of vernacular and nationalist politics, to that of Rajan, where Hindu mythology is galvanised to suggest the trauma of Partition. There are exceptions too, such as Sudhin Ghose, whose works repeatedly defy any such nationalist frameworks or conventional gender politics. What my research shows is the sheer heterogeneity in the use of folk tales and oral narratives, which are often but *not always* aligned with conscious nationalist politics. Underpinning all of them, and more powerful than the conscious politics of 'nation and narration', are childhood memories for each of the writers. I have considered a fund of folk tales and oral narratives which become the ground of rich symbolism and radical experimentation. In the process, they also often end up giving voice to the subaltern - the *kirtan* singer, the talkative man, the *harikatha* reciter, the grandmother or the *devadasi*. By way of conclusion, I shall provide some further reflection on the contacts and divergences of the five writers I have considered with reference to two issues: narrative form and the politics of gender. In a recent article, the distinguished Indian

⁸ He was from an upper caste. The family background and the manner articulately revealed his origins.

writer Amit Chaudhuri, while explaining the form of his novel, notes that Indian authors are usually feted for writing about 'India' rather than experimenting with the form of the novel. In the article interestingly entitled 'A brief history of my relationship with the novel as a form', he claims that 'it is difficult for the postcolonial or Indian artist's contribution to be discussed in formalist terms, because everything they do—the life they describe, the language they use becomes the testimony of postcolonial history'.⁹ While Chaudhuri is absolutely right about much of the contemporary state of Indian writing in English, the writers I have examined - belonging to early and mid twentieth century - experiment at the level of *form*: folklore, mythology and oral narratives become the mode of experimentation. These novels are linguistically fraught, formally complex and often digressive, as they bear testimony to both the thrill and the challenges of experimentation; like their Irish and American counterparts, the writers put pressure on the genre itself. And yet, perhaps because they were formally far more ambitious - and hence more difficult - they are at times brushed aside in favour of the busier and more crowded novels of 'postcolonial India' in the post-Rushdie mode.

Yet, each of them is marked by formal innovation. For instance, Rao consciously employs anaphora, parataxis and alliteration to give his novel an 'oral' feel while, in his second novel, he adopts a Puranic form as he ties together Indian and European myths and legends. Ghose, on the other hand, draws on the popular oral tradition and folk rituals of Bengal. However, while Rao adopts Grandmother as the narrator or performer; Ghose introduces multiple story-tellers and narrative centres, from Myna to Mashima. Narayan employs a very different set of narrative strategies, going for animal fables as well as the stock figure of the talkative man. In this, he shares common ground with Anand who,

⁹Amit Chaudhuri, "I am Ramu" <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/i-am-ramu/>. November, 2018.

similarly, employs animals and narrative tics to suggest orality. But the nature of their engagement with the folk tales, songs and proverbs varies deeply. Narayan's synthesis of short-story with folk tale imitates ancient models. Writing in the early 1940s, he nonetheless adheres to the prescribed rules of folk expression, but Anand very consciously breaks away from conventional patterns and transforms even folk tales as a genre, recreating the 'neo-folktale'. Myths and folk traditions, while marginalized within the mainstream popular culture, thus get exported, adapted and played upon in Indian 'high literature' written in English. From what I have analysed in the five chapters, it is clear that women dominate the folk tradition: the engagement of the authors with the women-centric folklore is significant. They are highly anglicised males who draw on the women's songs, tales, and proverbs to create their fictional world. Interestingly, while most of the nationalists within the country are not that interested (though there are exceptions), the anglicized, western educated or settled nationalist intellectuals seize upon them for complex political, emotional and narrative reasons. However, the nature of appropriation varies with each other. The usage is governed by the author's political and ideological leanings. Rao has a nationalist agenda in appropriating the women's songs and tales. There is no critique of Gandhi and his gender politics in the novel; rather, what we see is the canonisation of Gandhi as Mahatma through women's songs. Similarly, Rajan's use of the Sita myth effectively shifts the image of the epic heroine, but his adaptation also never goes beyond the nationalist narrative. On the other hand, Anand, Ghose, and Narayan are much more attuned to the question of women in India. A feminist at core, Ghose challenges the established social conventions around women while Narayan, as we have seen, provides a trenchant critique of the politics behind the expulsion of *devadasis* and turns his *devadasi* into one of the most morally robust, powerful and courageous characters in his novels. Both Ghose and Narayan provide a bitter commentary on the colonialist-nationalist appropriation of women's sexuality as the two colonial centres

responded to the religious or social Hindu practices as per the Victorian principles of morality and banned not so “pure” *devadasi* and women devotional singers. Belonging to Calcutta and Madras respectively - the two centres of colonial power where *devdasis* were banned from performing - and writing almost at the same time, Ghose and Narayan construct the characters of Myna and Rangi as fierce rebuttals against the disenfranchisement of the traditional performers. In the process, they write back both to the empire and feudal patriarchy. At the same time, even within these three progressive writers, the use of folklore and mythology is very different aligned to very different visions of the woman. Rao, in his second novel, falls back on the traditional mythological figure of Radha to recreate the conventional image of woman as a devoted wife. In contrast, the engagement of Ghose with the Radha-Krishna mythology dismantles the age-old patriarchal traditions that confine women within the four walls of the inner household. His female characters are liberated; even when they are uneducated. They are feisty, often sexually emancipated and question the established practices. Such diverse use of the same myth is significant and shows their various intensities of meaning.

I finish my study at 1961, but in the texts of the contemporary authors, we see a similar use of folk elements. For instance, Amitav Ghosh In both *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Sea of Poppies* (2009) introduces Bhojpuri song to provide textual density to the plot. One of the most radical experiments in recent memory is however by one of the writers we have examined at length: R. K. Narayan. Towards the end of his career, he returns once more to the genre of the oral narrative and his last novel *Grandmother's Tale* (1993) is unique in form and narrative as Narayan completely dissolves the genre of the novel into an oral tale. A number of other Anglophone writers such as Shashi Tharoor have used myth and folklore to create their own fiction. But what is remarkable is the radical difference between male authors appropriating female forms and women authors adapting women-centric oral forms.

Prior to these male authors, it was Bengum Rokaya Hussain Shekhawat who portrayed a radically different world dominated by women, where men had separate corners named “mardana” in her *Sultana’s Dream* (1905).¹⁰ She particularly drew on Urdu *dastan* tradition to write her fiction. Sarojini Naidu, while writing her poetry particularly drew from Bengal oral tradition and her anthology has a section where poetries are particularly written in an oral style. Speaking of the contemporary authors, it is in the works of Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy that we find an exemplary engagement with the folk material. While Ghosh again is a “male” author, Roy has broken barriers by her sheer bold style. In her new novel called *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), she adapts Kashmiri proverbial style to move her narrative. Such distinctive use of oral narrative makes it a significant tool for pronouncing commentary on controversial political issues.

One of the most effective uses of folklore has been in the area of films, both national and regional. Shyam Benegal’s first movie *Ankur* (1974) is unique in this respect: he explores how, in contrast to the classical brahminical world, the rural oral world allows women sexual freedom and the extra-marital affair of a woman is rewarded.¹¹ The cinema of Rituporna Ghosh carries a similar message. In addition, the engagement with the folklore in some of the current films such as *Tamasha* (2015), *Mirza-Sahiban* (2016), *Bahubali* (2015; 2018) and others opens up areas of exploration which are remarkably rich but beyond the remit of the present study.

¹⁰ See Barnita Baghchi, ‘Towards Ladyland’: Rokeya Sekhawat Hossain and the movement for women’s education in Bengal, c. 1900-C.1932, *Paedagogia Historica*, 45/6 (2009), 743-755.

¹¹ The film starts with a temple procession and a peasant woman is shown asking Goddess for a child. Her husband is shown impotent, but eventually through an illicit relationship she becomes a mother.



C. 1 A *Gita Press* shop at the Samastipur Railway Station. The institution like *Gita Press* are doing praiseworthy job in preserving as well as transmitting the oral forms.

What about the present state of folklore and myth in South Asia? Myth, as I have defined earlier, is attached to various religions in South Asia and so they continue to survive. But folklore is vanishing slowly but surely. Many folk singers are unfortunately abandoning their profession at the time the area is becoming a popular subject of study; consequently, it is important to have an inclusive, accessible and effective discourse on folklore that could easily connect to the contemporary situation. In the last couple of years, the electronic medium has given these folkloric genres a new life.¹² We can again here, take a clue from Anindita Ghosh's work where she has elucidated that insight of ban and charges of obscenity these folk forms prospered in the nineteenth century. The production of cheap books and pamphlet increased during the 1880s and 1890s. Still, it is important to note that during that period, government led by British beauracrats and influenced by elite Brahmins considered popular culture as "vulgar", but ordinary people were enthusiastic about these

¹² Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

forms. Today, it is the common people who are losing interest in these traditional forms of entertainment.

However, the Internet has brought a revolution of sorts as many of the songs or folk plays are recorded and published on various websites. Journalist P. Sainath and the organization *Pari* are doing wonderful work in collecting and translating grindmill songs popular in the Maharashtra State of India.¹³ They have collected more than a million songs and are now putting them on their website. At the same time, there are still many folk forms that are alive and regularly in use among both men and women, particularly the latter group. Sitting at a temple and singing songs with a group of women is a new form of recreation in modern India, though the politics of this is increasingly dubious in the current climate of religious nationalism. If folklore was the ground of radical experimentation and gender transgression in writers such as Anand and Ghose, it simultaneously existed as a form of patriarchal control and caste hierarchies in Raja Rao. Unfortunately, this regressive side, coupled with religious conservatism and sectarianism, is again making itself felt.

Yet, that should not take away from its rich variety, symbolic depth and affective power. Time and again, we have seen in the novels we have examined how the oral performance had brought together diverse kinds of people together and bound together a marginalised community in the joy of creation and narration, a mode of being responding to and against the seclusion. It is this power, aligned with the earliest childhood memory that spurred the writers I have considered into song.

¹³ Maharashtra is a state in the Western Part of India.



Figure C.1 Gangubai Ambore. For Gangubai singing song was the only possible way to survive.¹⁴

¹⁴ Medha Kale, 'Interview of Gangubai Ambore', <https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/the-grindmill-songs-recording-a-national-treasure>.

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